

Screen



Cinema audiences:

Fan mail

Whiteness

Weeping

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***The Piano* debate continued**

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Elizabeth Bergner in *Escape Me Never* (Paul Czinner, United Artists, 1935)
Picture courtesy: BFI Stills

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editorial address

The Editors, **Screen**
The John Logie Baird Centre
University of Glasgow
Glasgow G12 8QQ

information on **Screen on web site:**

<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/tfts/tfts@glasgow.html>

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'This business of America': fan mail, film reception, and *Meet John Doe*

ERIC SMOODIN

Yesterday morning at 2 am we were seeing our eldest son Denny, with 45 others, off for an Army Camp somewhere. At 2 pm of the same day, we were seeing our first Frank Capra picture, Meet John Doe. My! What a picture, just what this old world needs.¹

¹ 26 June 1941, from Mrs Coate. All of the correspondence cited in this essay is from the Frank Capra Collection, housed at the Wesleyan University Cinema Archives in Middletown, Connecticut.

In contemporary film studies, the voices of 'average' moviegoers like Mrs E. Coate, who wrote the above letter to Frank Capra in June 1941, typically have been lost. For Mrs Coate, seeing Capra's latest film marked an intense conflation of real-life problems – losing a son to military service and an almost certain war – with the fictional ones of the film. In addition, highly personal concerns combined with those that were, in fact, global. The film not only helped Mrs Coate through a difficult period, but was precisely 'what this old world needs'. This letter to Capra indicates a need to thank the film director, and to tell him that, rather than allowing Mrs Coate to forget about her difficulties for two hours, *Meet John Doe* helped her to contextualize them and to see them in relation to the issues that his film addressed.

We have little understanding of this kind of complex and deeply felt response to films from this period, largely because the study of the historical audience presents such serious problems, both methodologically and practically. It is impossible, for example, to produce any reasonable kind of 'ethnography' of the 1940s film audience to match the one that David Morley has constructed, through interviews and a careful process of selection, for the contemporary British television audience.² Moreover, the evidence of the historical audience's responses to films, probably ephemeral in the first place

² David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).

(preview cards, diary entries and so on), is exceedingly difficult to come by.

Although methodological constraints remain, film studies has begun the project of historicizing the film spectator. Among the most compelling work is that which indicates an interest, on the part of certain audiences, in a cinema that addressed concerns of 'political' importance. For instance, Janet Staiger has examined the mixture of spectatorial and political desire as it becomes apparent in a very specific group of viewers – film critics of the 1920s. Staiger has found that reviewers for ostensibly 'non-ideological' periodicals, such as the trade journal *Variety*, quite explicitly developed an aesthetic based as much upon a film's expression of hyperpatriotic nationalist positions as upon its manipulation of such formal categories as narrative development or visual style. In perhaps the most detailed analysis of an audience's political expectations and pleasures, Stephen Ross has shown that in the years leading up to World War I a wide audience existed, in New York and perhaps elsewhere, for labour union-produced feature films about unfair economic practices.³

Thus we have evidence that, at least during certain periods, the cinema came to be seen by many 'average' viewers as contributing directly to regional or national discussions about political issues. In this article, I want to examine film spectatorship from just such a period, the very early 1940s. My primary source of information will be the fan mail – and I use this term loosely to include both enthusiastic and critical letters – that Frank Capra received in 1941 just after the opening of *Meet John Doe*. Several significant questions arise from these fan-generated texts about the film: when, why, and in what manner did audiences perceive that a major Hollywood production spoke to national concerns or embodied a national consensus? What were viewers' expectations of a Capra film, and what pleasures did his work generate? Finally, what role did certain segments of the audience expect a film celebrity of Capra's status to play within the national political scene?

The letters about *Meet John Doe* indicate that for many film viewers the Hollywood cinema needed to engage more directly with issues of perceived importance. Even more broadly, for reasons that may have had something to do with the era's economic collapse but are not altogether self-evident, during this period there seems to have existed no necessary contradiction between consuming all manner of popular culture for entertainment and escape, and consuming it for at least a degree of political edification. By the time of *Doe*'s release, as Barbara Foley has pointed out, the proletarian novel had become an accepted (and occasionally best-selling) literary genre, one even occasionally spoken of admiringly by such arbiters of middle-class taste as the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Saturday Review of Literature*.⁴ During the same period, the populism of the previous century received its first serious scholarly attention with the 1931

3 Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 6; Steven J. Ross, 'Struggles for the screen: workers, radicals, and the political uses of silent film', *American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 2 (1991), pp. 333–67.

4 Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in US Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

5 See my article, "'Compulsory' viewing for every citizen: *Mr. Smith* and the rhetoric of reception', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1996).

6 Alva Johnston, 'Capra shoots as he pleases', *The Saturday Evening Post*, 14 May 1938, p. 72.

publication of John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt*, and at least some limited popular success with C. Vann Woodward's 1938 biography of the populist hero, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*. This interest in a politicized popular culture came from both the Left and the Right, from those who made Upton Sinclair's *I, Governor of California* a best seller, to those who listened to Father Coughlin's weekly national radio broadsides against Jews and communists.

This is not to imply that the readers of proletarian novels, or those with an interest in nineteenth-century political history, or those who sympathized with the socialist Sinclair, formed the central audience for Capra's films. But by 1941, as I will show, there was a broad field of cultural production aligning not only literature, history and political tracts, but also school textbooks, radio music programmes, public assemblies and even the occasional gossip column with discussions of pressing national issues. My own work on the reception of other Capra films released before *Doe* indicates that by the end of the 1930s at least some fairly large segments of the motion picture audience hoped for Hollywood to deal more 'realistically' with pressing political issues, and celebrated Capra for standing out from the rank and file of film directors because of his willingness to interrogate issues of wealth, corporate power, and government corruption.⁵

The era's discourse on Capra himself demonstrates that a popular culture that stressed politics over pure escape, and that attempted a critique of capitalism and the fabulously rich, might attract any number of eager viewers. By the late 1930s, after three Academy Awards, a number of box-office hits, and concerted publicity efforts by his employer, Columbia Pictures, Capra was almost certainly one of the two most famous directors in the country (probably only Cecil B. De Mille was better known). He was also one of a very select group of filmmakers (besides De Mille, Walt Disney comes to mind, and perhaps some of the studio moguls) who could compete with major movie stars in terms of celebrity and media attention; this attention, in Capra's case, typically centring as much on his politics as on his filmmaking abilities.

In 1938, even the magazine of homespun Americana, *The Saturday Evening Post*, wrote admiringly of Capra's reception in the Soviet Union, and implied that a communist audience understood democratic values far better than government officials in the USA:

For painting America as he sees it, [Capra] is regarded in Moscow as a Utopian dreamer. . . . Traveling in Russia after *Mr. Deeds [Goes to Town]* appeared, he was hailed as a comrade, a world improver and a Red propagandist. In their enthusiasm over Capra's portrait of an American philanthropist [in *Mr. Deeds*], the Soviet critics showed themselves far behind the advanced thinkers of Washington, who want to abolish the American philanthropist because his money is needed to buy votes with.⁶

7 Ibid.

8 Geoffrey T. Hellman, 'Profiles: thinker in Hollywood', *The New Yorker*, 24 February 1940, pp. 23–4.

9 I have read all of the *Meet John Doe* fan mail; those letters that I have not transcribed nevertheless correspond closely, in terms of concerns, interests and criticisms, to those that I have looked at most closely and that make up the letter sample used in this article. When I refer to the number of letters on a given topic, I mean the number that can be taken from the sample of letters that I have transcribed and studied the most carefully.

While the *Post* certified the filmmaker's patriotism ('Capra likes American institutions'), the magazine posited him as a version of one of his own heroes, battling against institutional forces that have a knee-jerk response to all social criticism and political debate: 'Capra says the best thing he ever worked on was *Soviet*, an unborn photoplay. He was getting ready to shoot it for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, when the company decided it was full of controversial dynamite and put it on the shelf.'⁷

In 1940, *The New Yorker*, a magazine with a decidedly more intellectual and elitist approach than the *Post*, called a profile on Capra 'Thinker in Hollywood', and referred to him as 'the most thoughtful man in the industry'. The magazine also admiringly stressed the connection between Capra and communist ideology, saying that, 'in Russia, the point of view he had displayed in *Mr. Deeds* caused him to be well received by Soviet officials'.⁸ Writers for mainstream magazines apparently saw no problem in constructing Capra as someone who embodied the best in the USA by incorporating that which was best about the Soviet Union. Almost certainly, part of the enthusiasm for Capra's films came from the audience's willingness to have their own political institutions criticized, and to have solutions posited that could, in some sense at least, be labeled 'communist', but that still posed no conflict with perceived basic US values, and that of course signalled no endorsement of Stalin or the Soviet Union.

Indeed, this position formed one of the defining characteristics of the 1930s-style populism embodied not only by Capra, but by, among others, such disparate characters as Father Coughlin, old-person's advocate Francis Townsend, Louisiana governor Huey Long and even Franklin Roosevelt: that is, a serious critique of wealth and class inequality, and a concomitant belief in a mixture of egalitarianism and the kind of activist Christianity endorsed by Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical, 'On reconstructing the social order'. The fan mail for *Doe* exhibits the same kind of commitment, but beyond this, and beyond the conviction that the cinema should address significant issues, the letters show no necessary formal or ideological consistency, ranging from Mrs Coate's family melodrama to more overtly political tracts, from religious allegory to discussions of the problems of nosy neighbours in small towns.

Capra deposited at least one hundred *Meet John Doe* letters with his papers at Wesleyan University, and I have transcribed approximately two thirds of them.⁹ The entire Capra collection is an interesting one, largely documenting the director's career and reputation from the early 1930s through the 1980s. The documents about his films – production records, press books, contracts, scripts, correspondence and so on – date from the early years of Capra's directing career, with materials covering such films as *Flight* (1930) and *Forbidden* (1931). For many of his films, Capra saved the correspondence that he received not only at the time of a production, but for many years after it, as new viewers

were exposed to his movies on television, at retrospectives, in college classes or on video. It is impossible to tell how selective Capra may have been in maintaining his papers. For virtually all of his post 1934 films, however, there are ample numbers of unfavourable film reviews and critical fan letters, implying that the filmmaker, early on, was interested in being able to document his career fully and was also something of a pack rat, unable to throw much out.

In spite of this apparent inclusiveness, interpreting the letters about *Meet John Doe* raises the issue of typicality, both in terms of the general response to Capra's movies and to those made by other filmmakers. Because of his celebrity, Capra undoubtedly received more fan mail than most directors, and because his films were frequently so overdetermined as narratives of nationalism, fan mail about his movies probably differed significantly from the fan mail generated by the more typical Hollywood product. And, of course, most viewers, whatever they may have thought about the movies they saw, chose to write no fan mail at all. Despite these limitations on interpretation, it seems at least plausible to assume that the mail Capra received tells us something about a variety of the subgroups and subcultures, to use Morley's terms, that made up the film audience in 1941. The letters certainly provide information about segments of what might be called the 'Capra audience', those fans who took a special interest in such films as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*. Further, given the widespread popularity of Capra's films during this period, and the general desire of so many consumers for a politicized popular culture, it figures that we can at least cautiously assume that the opinions expressed in the letters were shared by a great many movie fans.

The most extensive holdings in the Capra collection, including fan mail, begin around 1933 and 1934, with the production of *Lady For a Day* and *It Happened One Night*. At the same time, at least according to his autobiography, Capra became more and more concerned about his status as a filmmaker with a social consciousness, claiming that, in his post 1932 movies, 'I took a hard look at life from the eye level of the hard-pressed Smiths and Joneses'. Arguably, then, starting at about this time, Capra used his mail as something of a barometer, to determine whether he was in touch with what he called 'the real lot of American citizens'.¹⁰ Thus, Capra himself may have believed in the reliability of a relatively small number of letters to indicate a more broadly experienced response to his movies.

There are several reasons for studying the reception of *Meet John Doe* in particular, and its relationship to the period's popular political discourses. Most obviously, the film comes from a period in US history perched precariously between domestic economic collapse and entrance into World War II. In the context of Capra's career, *Doe* was the director's first film as an independent producer, and it also appeared more or less in the middle of what generally is considered

¹⁰ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: an Autobiography* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971). Both quotes are taken from p. 136.

Capra's most productive period – 1934 to 1946. *Meet John Doe* also comes from that cycle of films – *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), the *Why We Fight* films (1942–5), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) – that typically have been considered the most reflective of the US body politic. In film studies, however, in spite of a general acknowledgement of the social impact of the films, there has been very little effort made to examine just how that impact was felt, and, in fact, if it was felt at all, and by whom. As a result, we are left with little understanding of the tensions within the 'mass' audience, of the different kinds of pleasure that the Hollywood cinema could generate, and of the often intense interaction between viewers and the films they watched.

The experience of seeing Capra's film in 1941, at least as expressed on the conscious level of the fan letters, indicates a diverse range of interpretive possibilities. But the constant trope in the letters is the extent to which the film itself became something of a national document at a particularly crucial period in the country's history, when the effects of the Depression had hardly lessened, a war in Europe threatened to come to the USA, and Franklin Roosevelt's unprecedented election to a third term as president in 1940 raised concerns, at least among a significant minority of the electorate, about the possibilities of domestic dictatorship. Capra himself hoped that the film would depict 'the hard-nosed brutality' of the era, and reflect the manner in which 'Hitler's strong-arm success against democracy' was spreading, with 'little "führers" . . . springing up in America, to proclaim that freedom was weak, sterile, passé'.¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 303, 297.

Meet John Doe depicts the production of a 'forgotten man' by journalist Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck). Washed-up baseball player John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) 'becomes' Doe, and with Ann as his coach he protests the condition of all the John Does in the country. As a sign of his seriousness, Doe pledges to commit suicide on Christmas Eve, after which he becomes a national celebrity. Newspaper magnate D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold), who commands a personal army of storm troopers, senses the possibility of using Doe and his followers to promote his own dictatorial ambitions, and actively promotes Doe's celebrity and the Doe Clubs being formed across the country. Doe finally finds out about Norton's machinations and tries to expose them, but Norton manipulates the crowd at a mass rally for Doe into turning on their hero. A despondent Doe tries to fulfil his promise to commit suicide, but Ann and a suddenly repentant Norton convince him not to.

A number of fans, in the manner of Mrs Coate, spoke of *Doe*, which so clearly narrativized concerns about poverty, leadership, democracy and the possibilities for collective action, in terms of its

12 13 June 1941, from David Stephens.

13 Undated, from Linda Schoen.

14 24 June 1941, from Joyce Eden.

significant connection to major personal events, with at least three of the letter writers aligning the events in the film with their own graduation from high school. One recent graduate was up until three in the morning writing his letter, and told Capra that if he did not get to bed soon he would not be able to be at work by eight, and would certainly lose his job. The film made him realize 'that all this talk of pessimism that all high school graduates get must be wrong. . . . We are told that we go out to meet a cruel, hard, debasing world, of men that will cut your heart to sunders if they possibly can. There must be something else in the world.'¹² Yet another eighteen-year-old, who said she was graduating in a week, viewed the film as a statement directly from Capra, and took the occasion to admonish him. For her, spectatorship meant a kind of direct discussion with filmmakers, and implied contracts between Hollywood and filmgoers: 'I am very serious about this business of America', she wrote. 'I am hoping with all my heart that the message you gave to me . . . is sincere. I am hoping that you are not a D. B. Norton' (emphasis mine).¹³

Despite the emphasis on graduating from high school and the common denominator of the viewers' age, these examples represent differing experiences of *Meet John Doe*: one about the possibilities and problems confronting young people, and another that delineated an extraordinary kind of spectatorship that stressed a personal and very political conversation with Capra. Both letter writers, however, aligned the film with varying notions of the national – 'this business of America', in the words of the student – and about the responsibility of the cinema during times of perceived national crisis. For the first letter writer, motion pictures needed to provide an antidote to pessimism; for the second, movies had to offer both a serious message and a commitment to continuing to spread that message.

The high-school seniors or recent graduates who wrote to Capra (another told him 'I have often had ideas [like those in the movie], but never had the nerve to write them on paper for fear that someone would laugh at me')¹⁴ may in fact have been responding to more texts than just Capra's film. On 3 March 1941, *Time* magazine put Gary Cooper as John Doe on its cover. In the same issue, *Time* devoted several columns to the current textbook controversy in which high-school social science texts were being challenged by such institutions as the New York State Economic Council for being 'New Dealish in tone . . . critical of big business . . . [and] against unequal distribution of wealth and unequal opportunities in the U.S.'. The National Association of Manufacturers decided to examine the texts, hiring 'a liberal, a conservative and a Marxist' to look for objectivity and bias, with particular concentration on the texts' views of the US government and 'free business enterprise'. In other words, a battle was being waged over the possible interpretations of 'historical' rather than motion-picture texts, but many of the issues were precisely the same. The textbooks themselves apparently engaged in the same kind of

15 'Textbooks brought to book',
Time, 3 March 1941, pp. 39–40.

mildly progressive politics as Capra's film, which arguably equates big-time corporate capitalism with incipient fascism, and also tries to expose the plight of the 'forgotten men', the army of John Does. Moreover, the specific concerns about the textbooks centred on issues of representation, on the manner in which they depicted government and business and created a portrait of the nation.¹⁵

If even *Time* took notice, then the textbook controversy probably had some currency amongst Americans generally. Indeed, education leaders at this time seem to have been almost obsessively, and quite publically, interested in national, political projects. As just one example among many, in March 1941, a few days before *Doe* premiered in Los Angeles, a Pasadena, California school district official, speaking at a 'Youth and Democracy' rally, offered a five



John Doe on the cover of
Time, vol. XXXVII, no. 9,
 3 March 1941.

16 'Youth hear defense plea', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 March 1941, part I p. 12.

hundred dollar prize for the student who wrote the best essay on the topic, 'Why I Believe in America'.¹⁶ It seems reasonable to argue, then, that the students watching *Doe* and writing to Capra were in fact responding to a textual field that, in 1941 at least, could contain both movies and school books. Their intense reaction to Capra's film, and their stress on the connection between the movie and their own high-school graduations, might well show that their experience as film viewers was deeply influenced by their experience as members of the classroom audience. For these students, *Meet John Doe*, if not other films, provoked a similar kind of national and political sensibility to the one being constructed in schools, and encouraged its teenage viewers to respond as if they were listening to a teacher or reading a class text. In this case, two kinds of spectatorship – in movie theatres and in schoolrooms – merged, particularly around issues of government and business and the best ways to represent each.

Most of the letters that Capra deposited in the Wesleyan Collection, however, came from people whose frame of reference was not contemporary educational practice in secondary schools. In fact, some letter writers, through their spelling or grammatical practice, or through their own descriptions of themselves, stressed their opposition to educational discourse but nevertheless read the film in relation to complex national problems, often critiquing *Doe* for not dealing with them in a sufficiently sophisticated fashion. As with the high-school graduates, these letter writers show that spectatorship, in 1941, constituted an extremely nuanced and varied relationship between viewer and film text, and also between consumer and film industry.

One such letter writer, indicating her difference from those fans who confidently philosophized for Capra, told the director that 'I am just a dum [sic] person in your estimation'. But she also provided information about her and her husband's filmgoing habits and attitudes, both of which problematize notions of an audience eager for escape and viewing motion pictures as the ideal instrument of that escape. 'We go to a movie once in awhile', she wrote, 'once a month or so that is at night when I can get a tired husband to go.' Then she added that typically, they 'come home dripping with disgust and so mad that we have wasted our time energy and money, the money is the last you notice'. If these sentiments were in any way common, perhaps among adult, working audiences, then the cinema of the period constructed, along with other kinds of viewers, a sort of anti-spectator, for whom the cinema provided displeasure (in fact, generated 'disgust'). This viewer hated what she/he saw and considered moviegoing a waste of time and money, but nevertheless, at least occasionally, went to the movies anyway.

Capra films, however, stood out from the routine Hollywood product and, for this dissatisfied audience at least, constituted a kind

of special, quality, adult viewing experience, one worth the effort. The letter writer told Capra that despite her and her husband's low opinion of movies, 'we have always looked to you to do the right thing'. She proceeded to criticize the film, particularly for its ending (a constant complaint in the letters, and in much subsequent Capra literature). She wanted Doe to commit suicide and not to be saved by the repentant Norton. This final narrative failure particularly bothered her, because until then the film was 'just right for the times'. Then she told Capra something that had 'been smoldering in my heart for some time', and that his film had had the chance to address: 'why don't the Motion Pictures do something to help our country from the Hitlers within. The time is ripe for big things to be done.'

In other words, she interpreted *Meet John Doe* as detailing the possibility of a fascist takeover of the USA, from domestic enemies rather than foreign ones. By far the greatest number of letter writers in the Wesleyan collection interpreted Capra's film, with its corporate magnate plotting to take over the country, in just the same way, as a document detailing the USA's potential ruin from within, as a national allegory produced during perilous times. One viewer wrote that she 'was certainly made familiar by said picture with the unscrupulous political machines working in our country today to undermine [sic] American principles and ideals'. Another wrote that, until the problematic ending, the film showed him the possibility to 'beat the pants off all the crooked politicians and lick all the hard luck and "isms" in this cockeyed world of ours'. Yet another insisted that 'the spirit that is awakened in people through seeing *John Doe* must be related somehow to the need for national unity'. A viewer from New York wrote of the responsibility of the entire motion picture industry to uphold democratic institutions, and thus of the exemplary status of Capra's film: 'as one who regards democracy as the strongest theme the movie makers can use now and forever . . . I should like to congratulate you on your achievement'.¹⁷

For these viewers, then, the Hollywood cinema typically was not enough concerned with the national welfare, in that movies tended not to promote or embody the country's values or protect its institutions. As a result, *Meet John Doe* deserved special mention because of the way it ably reflected, at least according to these viewers, both spectatorial desire and political reality. At least twenty fans (almost one third of the sample that I have been able to study carefully) wrote to Capra to talk about the film's timeliness and its defence of democracy, implying that for many spectators, viewing pleasure by 1941 meant not being allowed to forget, even for two hours, a perceived threat to the USA from domestic fascism and political corruption. I do not intend to imply here that most viewers completely eschewed escapism – there were certainly plenty of movies made in 1941 that amply provided it. But the *Doe* letters indicate a desire for a kind of viewing practice that addressed the audience as a nation, and

17 11 February 1941, from Mrs T. M. Cantwell; 29 March 1941, from Ezilda Marie Sutton; 9 April 1941, from Mary Hagedorn; 17 March 1941, from Horace E. Levin.

that audience members could apply outside the theatre, particularly in the development of the 'national unity' and regard for democracy that so many fans stressed should be the primary goal of motion pictures.

The concerns of these letter writers were not isolated ones. Their readings of the film, in fact, can be placed against numerous texts from different sources that emphasized the national implications of Capra's film. In her gossip column in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, Hedda Hopper, hardly a defender of politicized cinema, wrote that people had been waiting for *Doe* ever since Capra's last film, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, had critiqued government so effectively. She was hardly disappointed in the follow-up effort, calling *Doe* 'a much-needed dose of optimism to lift us out of the slough of defeatism everyone's wallowing in'. In a more detailed analysis of the film's relation to current events, Edwin Schallert, in his *Los Angeles Times* review, praised the film's 'social significance', and insisted that the picture would 'give a new turn to the thoughts of a nation'. The communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* discussed throughout its review the connection between the film (and, indeed, Capra's entire oeuvre) and contemporary politics. Even some of the studio-generated publicity for the film sought to produce something of a nationalist response by stressing, for instance, the score by Dmitri Tiomkin, which 'will describe in musical terms the daily life of an average American family of four', and which 'blends the folk music of every section of the nation'.¹⁸

Of course, the texts surrounding any film are never so unanimous. While some of the advertising emphasized the romanticized, US folk tradition reflected in the score, other publicity stressed the film's relation to consumption practice rather than to issues of national unity or of any perceived urgency to the body politic. Exhibitors across the country concocted tie-ins between the movie and newspapers, department stores, transit systems and radio shows, thus using *Doe* to support the same mass media and economic practices that Capra's film ostensibly critiques.¹⁹ Even the 'text' of the film's gala Los Angeles premiere exemplified a kind of fascist aesthetic that seems antithetical to the film's political project, at least as the letter writers interpreted it. Reporting on the premiere, the *Los Angeles Times* noted that the security staff that evening 'was augmented by . . . 40 members of the Vic McLaglen motorcycle troop', reprising their role as Norton's private storm troopers in the film, with the difference that these Hollywood vigilantes were viewed as keepers of the peace at the premiere rather than as threats to it, as in the film.²⁰

Even the viewers, while concentrating on the political implications of the film, interpreted them in different ways. Rather than concentrating on the threat of domestic fascism and the erosion of democratic institutions, at least eight fans concentrated on the manner in which the film conflated national values with spiritual ones. One viewer wrote to Capra that 'I really had a feeling that I had seen a

¹⁸ 'Hedda Hopper's Hollywood', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 1941, part III, p. 3; Edwin Schallert, 'Meet John Doe hailed as Capra victory', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 1941, part I, p. 16; David Platt, 'Meet John Doe lets film audiences down', *The Daily Worker*, 15 March 1941, p. 7; *Hollywood News*, from the News and Feature Service, Warner Bros Studio, vol. VII, no. 13, 27 January 1941; 'Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck star in Capra production *Meet John Doe*', in Warner Bros press book.

¹⁹ For promotional tie-in information, see, for example, 'John Doe gets 4-city opening', *Motion Picture Herald*, 29 March 1941, p. 66.

²⁰ Read Kendall, 'Stars, fans brave rain to attend gay film event', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 1941, part I, p. 16.

²¹ 26 February 1941, from Howard V. C. Davis; 9 March 1941, from Maurine Robison; 19 August 1941, from Miss Grace Rasche.

²² 13 June 1941, from E. C. Olson.

²³ 23 March 1941, from Ingeborg Tillisch.

picture that was destined not only to make a name for itself . . . but a picture that actually would start the country in a movement toward the Golden Rule'. Another 'commended' Capra 'for the red-blooded patriotism and the spiritual atmosphere that permeates the entire picture', while a teenager who claimed that she was 'not a specially serious minded person' nevertheless told Capra that 'people know this picture stands for everything Christ stood for', and that 'America is a grand country, but it needs more of this'.²¹

In fact, several of these viewers seemed to seek these values and also find them in a range of films, indicating that for at least one group of filmgoers there might have been little difference between that which today we might consider typically escapist, and that which, like *Doe*, might seem like serious entertainment. One viewer asked Capra for a series of *Doe* films, saying that 'a continuity of pictures in this theme might be possible, just as the *Andy Hardy* series has been in its concept'. The letter went on that at 'the center of these [*Hardy*] pictures is the spiritual value, but in my estimation *Meet John Doe* was more penetrating and practical'.²² If some of *Doe*'s viewers desired a cinema that refused to provide them with escape, others clearly went to the movies primarily to see a reflection of religious values, and did not make the distinction between films that were escapist or not, realistic or non-realistic, frivolous or high minded. Rather, there were only spiritual and non-spiritual films, so that *Meet John Doe* and an *Andy Hardy* film, despite the generic, production, authorial, political and other differences we might point out today, could be seen as providing virtually identical viewing experiences.

The fan mail about *Meet John Doe* indicates that many viewers believed in the possibility of a kind of participatory spectatorship, and looked to Hollywood to make films to promote civic action and even to create politically motivated audiences outside of the theatre. Capra received no less than a dozen letters telling him that his film had indeed started a John Doe movement, with Doe Clubs across the country trying to create a local and then national response to national problems (other than the testimony of the letters, however, I have found no evidence in newspapers and magazines from the period that Doe Clubs actually formed or, if they did, created much of a following).

Letter writers discussed the film as well as these attempts to create the clubs in relation to the perceived dangerous route that Depression-era democracy had taken. One person complained, for example, that there had been limited response to her clubs, and to her theory of a 'people's democracy', because 'the people have been doped for so long it's awfully hard for the poor devils to see the light'.²³ Another viewer, in a letter deeply critical of the end of the film, asserted nevertheless that *Doe* virtually formed the clubs

24 13 March 1941, from M. Gluck.

spontaneously, and in describing this phenomenon the viewer alluded to the construction of a spectator motivated to political, collective action by the movie, but also virtually helpless against the workings of the film text: 'By the time you had the band play the Star Spangled Banner', he wrote, 'we were about ready to turn around and give away anything we had to anybody that needed it. You *had* a John Doe Club right there in the theater.'²⁴

Of course, the viewer exaggerated; no John Doe Club actually formed during the movie that night. Nevertheless, despite the hyperbole, this statement stands out as an extraordinary assertion of a kind of spectatorship that has not been theorized fully, if at all: viewers who are simultaneously completely passive (apparently ready to do anything the film tells them) and absolutely active (seemingly mobilized to engage in collective action while still in the theatre). More broadly, the letter points up the astonishing political power that many audiences wanted the cinema to exercise, and the deep disappointment they felt when movies seemed to refuse this responsibility. Viewers of *Doe* typically extended this power to Capra himself, with the director emerging as a potential hero of national rehabilitation, as just the man to mobilize the masses.

25 14 May 1941, from Louis A. Meli; 9 April 1941, from Mary Hagedorn; 19 May 1941, from Mr and Mrs David Greenberg.

Nine viewers told Capra he was a 'genius', or compared him to such disparate national heroes as General Pershing and Walter Winchell.²⁵ And at least another seven viewers expressed their admiration for Capra by urging him to continue, and take control of, the incipient John Doe movement. One letter writer, for instance, insisted that 'the responsibility falls on your shoulder; to you will come the plea to carry through that which you have started'. By fulfilling this responsibility, Capra would help 'raise the motion picture industry to the height which it deserves – that of being a bearer of the simple truth to all people who seek it'.²⁶ Capra's special status comes out in many of the letters, as well as the belief that the film industry had not nearly reached its potential as a political force, a potential that also, at least in part, was like a religious calling.

26 13 May 1941, from Charles H. Martin.

Echoing those viewers who conflated nationalism with spirituality and who viewed the film in deeply religious terms, one letter writer, for instance, implicitly looked to Capra as a kind of evangelical leader. 'This isn't a picture', the viewer insisted, 'it's one of the most powerful sermons since the one on the mount', and he continued that 'there are millions of more John Does who believe the same thing, but who are waiting for someone to bring it to their attention'. Indeed, Capra's leadership was necessary because of crushing national and even global problems. 'I'm just one of the millions of John Does', the letter continued, 'who are sick of wars . . . and the eventual taxes that are piled on us; of the cheap petty politics with their intrigue and selfishness'. Then, in a final assertion of Capra's influence and the power of the film text to mobilize people, the letter suggested a sequel to *Doe*, at the end of which Capra himself would appear and urge

27 Undated, from George B. Nordman.

28 16 May 1941, Capra to Charles H. Martin.

29 Nick Browne, 'System of production/system of representation: industry context and ideological form in Capra's *Meet John Doe*', in Charles Wolfe (ed.), *Meet John Doe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 284–5.

30 13 March 1941, from M. Gluck; undated, from Keith Gordon.

'those in the audience to get together on the John Doe principle'.²⁷ In other words, this viewer proposed a direct address appeal by Capra as director/star/national leader, thereby invoking, while not mentioning, the model of Charles Chaplin at the end of *The Great Dictator*, when Chaplin steps out of character to address the audience about tolerance and world peace.

To his credit, it appears that Capra responded to many of the viewers who wrote to him (these responses are included in the Wesleyan collection). To those who virtually demanded his leadership he always demurred, citing his own limited organizational skills and the possibility for critics to detect a conflict of interest. Running the John Doe Clubs 'would be cynically taken in many places as a publicity stunt for the picture', he wrote to one fan, adding that 'my job and my talents and my hope is to continue to make pictures', rather than direct a national movement.²⁸

The number of letter writers who so admired Capra, who requested his help and who asked him to be their leader, at least implies, without making any direct link between the fans who wrote and those who did not, that a significant portion of the audience wished to be spoken to by someone they could trust, to be addressed as a mass audience eager to implement the John Doe philosophy. In an invaluable discussion of the complexity of contextualizing Hollywood products, Nick Browne has pointed out that the discursive strategies of *Meet John Doe* – the use the narrative makes of mass rallies and radio networks, the constant invocations of 'the people' – work to address the audience 'as a congregation', as 'America'.²⁹ Indeed, if the letters in the Wesleyan collection are any indication, the audiences of the film clearly wanted to be addressed in just this way, and felt the strongest identification not so much with any major characters in *Meet John Doe*, but with the audience within the film, the audience that Doe exhorts.

If the cinema can be read in terms of audience desire, then we must keep in mind, at least for the period covered by *Doe*'s release, the desire to be addressed as an audience, and indeed as a national audience needing to be called to action around national concerns. In fact, one of the perceived problems with the film had to do with the intensity of the identification with the audience-within-the-film. At least nine of the letter writers were harshly critical of the scene towards the end of the movie when the members of the John Doe Clubs turn on their leader, expressing a sense of personal betrayal at the portrait of themselves as mean spirited and unforgiving. A letter from 'six John and Jane Does' told Capra that 'You showed us that you *don't* believe in us', and insisted that 'You think we're a lot of silly sheep'. Yet another viewer complained to Capra that 'We John Does are made to look like Judases who would sell out their leader'.³⁰

Indeed, the most common criticism in the fan mail that Capra saved dealt with the representation of a featureless national audience, of a mass which, for many viewers, constituted the real star in the film, directly mirrored the audience in the theatre, and finally appeared as nothing more than a mob. Individual spectators clearly viewed the film as speaking to a national spectator, and their most intense reactions came from their understanding of how that national spectator was both depicted and addressed.

By so stressing their own status as members of a national audience, viewers showed themselves to be adopting a subject position that had seemingly come to be required by the growing number of entertainment activities that were overtly nationalist or political in nature, or by 1941 had come to be considered so. On network radio alone in 1941, for example, 'the time had come for U.S. writers to fill the air full of the cause of democracy', in the words of an article in *Time* magazine, with CBS broadcasting *The Free Company*, a weekly programme dwelling on those freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Three times a week, the same network broadcast *Back Where I Come From*, devoted to US folk songs, while other shows, like *America's Town Meeting of the Air* and *MBS's American Forum of the Air*, broadcast discussions about the New Deal or the dangers of domestic communism. Even the popular media's discussion of cultural production, which typically had been spoken of aesthetically rather than in political terms, emphasized the political systems that might lead to certain forms. In the same issue of *Time* that discussed *The Free Company*, for example, an art critic reviewed a display of European sculpture in New York, and opined that 'under paternalistic governments, artists produce the kind of art the government likes', while 'under a democracy, artists produce the kind of art they themselves like'.³¹

By the time of the release of *Meet John Doe*, then, it had become difficult to read about popular culture or to 'experience' it without being made aware of being addressed as a spectator or listener whose primary identity had to be that of US citizen, or at least that of active participant in a political system. In an acknowledgement of this kind of audience, national leaders, before the widespread availability and use of television, frequently took their shows on the road, just as Doe does in Capra's film, and developed one of the significant forms of popular entertainment in the 1930s and 1940s, the mass rally, which self-consciously collapsed the distinctions between politics, patriotism, audience participation and spectatorial pleasure. In March 1941, for instance, Los Angeles alone hosted several of these rallies at the same time as it served as one of the sites of the initial, limited release of *Meet John Doe*. News analyst H. V. Kaltenborn, himself something of a Capra hero after appearing in a small part (as himself) in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, addressed a crowd of five thousand, despite a threatened demonstration by the isolationist America First Committee.

³¹ All citations are from *Time* magazine: 'Of thee I sing', 24 February 1941, p. 55; 'Folk songs in the White House', 3 March 1941, p. 57; 'MBS Soapbox', 24 March 1941; 'Democracy on pedestals', 24 February 1941, p. 66.

- ³² All citations are from *Los Angeles Times*: 'Threatened demonstration at Kaltenborn talk fizzles', 5 March 1941, *City News*, p. 1; 'Eva [sic] Curie arrives in city', 7 March 1941, part II, pp. 1–2; 'Philip F. La Follette will speak Monday', 7 March 1941, part II, p. 2; "'I Am an American'" leaders selected', 7 March 1941, part II, p. 1.
- ³³ 'Get your tickets today for Foster mass meeting', *The Daily Worker*, 14 March 1941, p. 4.

Similarly, journalist and author Eve Curie spoke to a large audience about the war in Europe, while the same America First Committee that had challenged Kaltenborn's right to an audience sponsored a mass anti-war rally featuring the ex-governor of Wisconsin, Philip LaFollette. Demonstrating the era's easy slippage, at least publicly, between government and entertainment, a group of actors along with federal and Los Angeles city officials announced the formation of the 'I Am an American Foundation', with plans to organize a rally to 'welcome . . . and instruct new citizens before a Shrine of the Constitution'.³²

In March of the same year, in New York, the Communist Party sponsored a rally for eighteen thousand people in Madison Square Garden to celebrate the birthday of party leader William Foster 'in song, pageant, banners and tributes', with the audience urged to 'rally and demonstrate for freedom and peace'.³³ Clearly, by 1941, politics, celebrity, entertainment, education and spectacle had coalesced in the mass rally, with audiences expected to take part in the proceedings by asserting, for instance, their status as citizens, as in the case of the 'I Am an American' extravaganza, or their commitment to non-intervention, as in the Communist rally, or, as in the case of the Kaltenborn or Curie addresses, their concern with national and world affairs. The audiences of *Meet John Doe* that were so critical of the representation of the audience-within-the-film were in fact acting like the mass rally audience, judging and then responding to the message Doe gives at his own rally, and then chastising Capra for misunderstanding that response.

I do not mean to romanticize a kind of politically motivated, now long-gone movie audience that tried to interact politically and collectively with a broad range of popular entertainments. Such an audience would provide no guarantee of progressive politics, as a few of the most enthusiastic fans of *Meet John Doe*, for instance, displayed an all too eager nativism, thanking Capra for making a film for 'real Americans'.³⁴ My point is that in 1941 there existed at least a significant section of the audience organized around issues of perceived national importance and ready to participate in debates about those issues, and that expected the popular culture industries to take their interests and desires into consideration. Even the federal government apparently recognized the significance of that audience and Capra's ability to reach out to it. Only a year after *Meet John Doe*, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall made the newly enlisted Capra the director of a massive military propaganda project that resulted in the *Why We Fight* and *Know Your Ally* films, as well as lesser known documentaries that proselytized for the war effort, and that sought to create a national consensus among the millions of armed forces personnel who were compelled to watch those movies.

- ³⁴ See, for example, 27 February 1941, from Alida Ducker.

³⁵ See, for example, 4 August 1941, from Bill McNutt.

³⁶ For a discussion of the discourses of the New Deal, including both government policy and the work of the Lynds, see Gary Gerstle, 'The protean character of American liberalism', *American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 4 (1994), pp. 1043–73.

There is ample evidence in the fan mail that the 'nationalized' and 'politicized' audience for *Meet John Doe* definitely was not a monolithic one. Capra received a number of letters that had nothing to do with the connection between his film and any perceived national emergency. Some letter writers asked him for jobs, sent him ideas for movies, shared the poems or songs they had written or just made general gripes. There were also several letters that complained about Capra's commitment since 1936 to 'message' films, and implored him to return to the more escapist fantasies of *It Happened One Night* and *Broadway Bill* (both from 1934).³⁵ At a greater-than-fifty-year remove from the letters, and because writers tended to speak of themselves primarily as 'John Does', it is also extremely difficult to categorize responses to the film that might be class- or race-based. Finally, I know of no reliable method of determining whether the dominant sentiments expressed in the fan letters accurately represented the opinions of the millions of viewers who did not write to Capra.

What do emerge from the letters, however, are concerns both at odds with and sympathetic to much New Deal discourse. Rather than reflecting the need for economic reorganization, which so many Roosevelt bureaucrats stressed, the letters indicate a belief in a disjunction between 'traditional' US values of neighbourliness and participatory democracy, and an individualized, segmented modernity. In this, the letters closely followed the general findings of Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown*, a 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana, except that while the Lynds blamed developments in capitalism for the demise of long-held values, the letter writers cast a larger net, and worried about the effects of 'isms' in general.³⁶

The issues relating to a politicized, nationalized popular culture, and the relations between 'the people' and their political systems, cannot be settled purely by an analysis of a sample of the fan mail sent to one director about just one of his films. But I would argue that such an analysis allows us to begin the process of studying the cinema at the point of consumption, that is, by looking at the varied reception strategies of movie audiences. This kind of project also forces us to complicate a tendency to consider Hollywood production from the studio era as unproblematically constituting a 'national' cinema. Evidence such as the Capra fan mail demonstrates that formations such as 'the nation' and 'the national audience' are never static or unchanging. Instead, the letters indicate the possibility for tracking the formation of and perceptions about the nation in particular periods through the interaction of audiences and the products of their popular culture. In doing so, we might, in fact, have to proceed on a case-by-case basis. *Meet John Doe*, then, may well stand out as a nationalist film and political tract produced by a cinema that many in the audience from the period believed to be derelict precisely in its production of national, politically significant artefacts.

Although the information can be difficult to locate, there exists a

37 Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, p. 305.

fair amount of evidence from the period of *Meet John Doe*'s release of the interactive nature of film production and film viewing, of the manner in which those making films solicited and made use of audience response – among other things, exhibitors' reports, preview cards, poll results, box-office figures and, of course, fan mail. Capra himself claimed in his autobiography that the mail he received about *Meet John Doe* after its initial, limited release helped him decide to modify the ending of the film for national distribution.³⁷ Thus we need to place any study of Hollywood production alongside an analysis of the reception texts produced by historically specific audiences. In particular, these texts help us understand not just the interpretations that some spectators made of the films that they saw, but also the charged, dynamic relationships between spectators and the film industry, the film celebrity and, perhaps most interestingly, other spectators.

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What do you do when minority means you? *Falling Down* and the construction of 'whiteness'

JOHN GABRIEL

Los Angeles has provided a fertile site for postmodernism's analysis of urban change. The idea of compressed global space has been recognized in the intensity and scale of fragmentation, contradiction and irrationality in the city. The latter has fractured along ethnic and class fault lines, not to mention a myriad of identities built around consumption patterns and lifestyles. Global migration and the presence of diasporic Latino, Asian and African communities on the one hand, and the collapse of manufacturing, the rise of the service sector and the contraction of the public sector on the other hand, have accentuated these divisions. At the same time, global political changes, notably a world order without cold-war divisions and the emergence of powerful transnational blocs, have, amongst other consequences, provoked crises of national identity across Europe and in the USA. The city of Los Angeles provides an intriguing site both for the expression and interpretation of such divisions and anxieties. Affluence and poverty live next door to each other, assuming you have somewhere to live. Life can be in the fast lane, but it can also be up a dead end. Food might be fast too, if you can afford it. Your city 'space' may be a private golf course or it may be a blighted stretch of urban wasteland. Los Angeles has captured the turn-of-the-century imagination because it expresses the certainty of uncertainty, the universality of difference. The ambiguities around postmodernism's assessments of these urban changes are, as you would expect, both attractive and infuriating. Are such changes to be celebrated or

1 Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith, 'Racism and the postmodern city', in Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith (eds), *Racism, the City and the State* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 16ff.

2 *Newsweek*, 1 March 1993, p. 44.

3 Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: the Fraying of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4 Whereby both governments and private corporations attached affirmative action conditions to contracts with corporations with whom they did business.

condemned? Whose imaginary past is captured in historical representations of the nation and the city? Is the latter a 'crucible for unoppressive politics' or the 'site of new oppressions'?¹ Is it a playground or a terrordome?

The photograph used on hoardings, outside cinemas and on the video cover of Joel Schumacher's film *Falling Down* (1992) plays on these themes. Clean cut, dressed in a 1950s/60s short-sleeved white shirt with his hair in a crew cut, Michael Douglas stands alone against a desolate urban backdrop with the LA skyline in the background. His figure appears almost superimposed on its surroundings, thus accentuating a sense of displacement and alienation. Moreover, the blurb on the video cover appears to lend moral endorsement to the actions of the central character: 'The adventures of an ordinary man at war with the everyday world. In the battlefield of life the time has come for one man to fight back.' According to media reports, when the film was screened in the USA its white audiences cheered and applauded D-Fens, played by Michael Douglas, as he set about smashing up a Korean-owned corner shop, and beating and shooting members of a Latino gang. The magazine *Newsweek* claimed that the film 'wants to be a Major Statement about middle-class frustration in a deteriorating multi-cultural society' and 'while solemnly condemning racism and violence, it doesn't miss an opportunity to play on the audience's most paranoid instincts'.² The film was thus understood, in this review and elsewhere, as part of a backlash against cultural diversity, multiculturalism, Afrocentrism and affirmative action. Whilst elements of this backlash had their origins in new right Reaganite politics, it has since built up an important consensus of liberal support in the 1980s and 1990s. In a critically acclaimed set of essays, Robert Hughes suggests that multiculturalism, laudable as it is, has reached the point where whites have become the victims, and are deserving of some redress.³

Relatedly, the arguments surrounding 'political correctness' emerged in the 1980s, initially on college campuses, both as a response to attempts to remove racially offensive language from official documents and informal conversation, and as an attack on new departures in literary criticism. It has since become a catchphrase used to deride all attempts to tackle racial discrimination and disadvantage through affirmative action programmes. The latter varyingly entailed the introduction of employment/admissions quotas to redress under-representation of minorities, racism awareness training and contract compliance.⁴ Whites are the new victims, according to this discourse, and, moreover, not far off becoming a minority in a city where the majority population will soon be Latino. It is whites, allegedly, who have lost their rights to employment (through the use of minority quotas), free speech (for example, through the introduction of nonracist guidelines on college campuses and corporations), and their rightful claims to territory and space. In a recent talk on

5 Jean Baudrillard, 'Hyperreal America', *Economy and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1989), p. 248.

America, the French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, described racism in the USA 'not as a problem that arises ideologically, or in moral terms of human rights, but in terms of energy, virulence and space'.⁵ *Falling Down* has thus been understood, according to the US media, to epitomize this white plight. The day's events chronicled in the film were arguably built around the loss of both employment and territory or space. The central character of Bill was thus widely understood, at least in the USA, to embody a white cultural backlash. The white male victim role came easily to Michael Douglas, who had played alongside Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992). *Falling Down*'s audience was thus primed by both the casting and pre-publicity to encounter yet another oppressed white male.

Briefly, the film depicts the day in the life of a laid-off defence department worker Bill (or D-Fens as he is referred to), who, having abandoned his car in the morning rush-hour traffic, then sets out 'to go home', or more precisely to the house of his ex-wife, for his daughter's birthday. The film is built around a series of encounters which take place during the course of the day: in a Korean shop, which he almost demolishes; on a patch of wasteland where he clashes with a Puerto Rican gang; at an army surplus store whose owner, a homophobic neo-fascist, he kills; in a wammyburger restaurant which he holds up at gun-point to make a complaint; on a golf course where he demands a right of way and indirectly causes the death of one of the golfers; and at a roadworks which he blows up. The police, who by this time are in hot pursuit, eventually confront him on the pier just after he manages to catch up with his daughter and ex-wife. After an exchange of words with the police officer, played by Robert Duvall, D-Fens is shot, falls over the pier into the ocean and dies.

The research on which this article is based is concerned with two aspects of the film's reception in Britain, or Birmingham to be precise.⁶ My initial interest in the film had in fact been sparked by its reported reception in the USA and my mistaken assumption that it would provoke a similar response on this side of the Atlantic. I was wrong, not only because the responses in Britain were infinitely more varied and ambiguous than those reported in the USA, but I was also undoubtedly naive in assuming that the highly selective media coverage of the film's reception exhausted all possible audience reactions in the USA itself. Although there may be a distinctively British/Birmingham response, underlining what Dick Hebdidge and others acknowledge to be the subversive potential of Hollywood film for young Britons, there is no way of knowing this without conducting similar research in the USA.⁷

Media reports of the film's reception emphasized the ways in which it encouraged its white male audiences in the USA to 'come out' in relation to their white masculinities.⁸ In *D-Fens*, it provided a character with whom they could readily identify. Following this, I

6 The fieldwork was based on a combination of one-to-one interviews and group discussions with up to a maximum of four people. In all sixteen people were interviewed. The interviews were held at the Arcadian's MGM cinema complex in Birmingham's renovated Chinese quarter. To make it easier to identify interviewees in what follows, a full list is given at the end of this article, based on information volunteered and self-identification.

7 Cited in Duncan Webster, *Looka Yonda* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 183ff.

8 Carol Clover, 'White noise', *Sight and Sound* (May 1993), p. 6.

- 9 Cited in J. Katz, *White Awareness* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).
- 10 Richard Dyer, 'White', *Screen* vol. 28, no. 4 (1988), p. 44.
- 11 Stuart Hall, 'Minimal selves', in *The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity* (London: ICA, 1987); 'New ethnicities', in *Black Film British Cinema* (London: ICA, 1988); 'The local and the global: globalization and ethnicity' and 'Old and new identities: old and new ethnicities', in A. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).
- 12 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 114.
- 13 bell hooks, *Black Looks* (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 175.
- 14 Gargi Bhattacharyya and John Gabriel, 'Gurinder Chadha and the *Apna* generation', *Third Text*, no. 27 (Summer 1994), pp. 55–63.
- 15 Jackie Stacey, 'Textual obsessions: methodology, history and researching female spectatorship', *Screen* vol. 34, no. 3 (1993), pp. 260–74.

wanted to use the film as a means to explore current debates concerned with the construction of white identities. Whiteness has been alluded to in the past, notably in terms of the psychological effects of racism on whites. Du Bois, for example, writing in 1920, described the way in which racism ironically imprisoned whites.⁹ There has, however, been little sustained discussion of the social construction of whiteness. Studies of ethnicity and race have made subordinate groups their main object of study. In his essay, 'White', Richard Dyer wrote, 'whiteness is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death'.¹⁰ The idea that whiteness has been conspicuous by its absence has been taken up by Stuart Hall in recent essays on identity.¹¹ Whiteness is defined implicitly in the process of defining otherness, never explicitly for itself. Why, the question is posed, is it so hard for whites to acknowledge their own ethnicity? Is it guilt or is it just that the very act of defining whiteness displaces it as the norm and demotes it to just another ethnicity?

It is also important to look at the ways in which whiteness is perceived by others. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes his reaction to being shouted at: 'Look at the nigger . . . Mama a Negro'; how the white man 'imprisoned him', 'sealed him into that crushing objecthood'. 'The white world, the only honourable one, barred me from all participation.'¹² For Fanon, the incident can be understood as part of a wider cultural process, that of constructing a sense of white superiority. It is thus important to reconstruct whiteness in the black imagination. The idea of fear, which is at the heart of Fanon's encounter above, is taken up by bell hooks in her writing.¹³ In popular culture, including film, whiteness has been rendered more visible through the work of black directors, writers, musicians and artists. Films like Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994) provide a portrait of Britishness which is all the more striking because of, rather than in spite of, the film's primary focus on British Asian culture.¹⁴

My interest in the film's reception in the above terms led me to consider a small audience research study. However, as it transpired, there was very little in the way of cinema research to guide me. Jackie Stacey has written persuasively on the reasons for the dearth of cinema reception studies and the absence of an open discussion of research methods in the field of film studies.¹⁵ The latter has been dominated by text-led paradigms and, in particular, by structuralism, psychoanalysis and their derivatives. Important though these approaches have been, they have left little room to explore the processes by which different audiences (in this case from in the USA and UK) come to different understandings of the film. The idea that an audience takes only one message from a film, and that this can be deduced from a careful deconstruction of the text itself, has been convincingly challenged in television studies. Valerie Walkerdine's study of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky II* (1979) demonstrates the

16 Valerie Walkerdine, *School Girl Fictions* (London: Verso, 1990).

17 T. Liebes and E. Katz, *Export of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

18 David Morley, 'Changing paradigms in audience studies', in Ellen Seiter et al. (eds), *Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989). See also Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

19 Jude Davis, 'Gender, ethnicity and cultural crisis in *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 214–32.

20 Cited in Jackie Stacey, 'Feminine fascinations' in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom* (London: Routledge, 1991).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

different ways in which class and gender mediated individual family readings of the film.¹⁶ Likewise, in their study of *Dallas*, Katz and Liebes found that whilst some responses to the soap were universal, there were also many which could only be understood in terms of the cultural context in which the programme was watched.¹⁷ The research on television audiences has been extremely valuable, although, as David Morley reminds us, television and cinema should be understood as offering distinct regimes of representation, vision and reception.¹⁸

The onus on the audience researcher is to explore the ways in which interpretations flow from the intersection of the film as a body of representations and the knowledge brought to the film by its audiences. The result of such negotiations elicits not one but many sets of interpretations and alignments, and hence serves to position people in different ways. Accordingly, my aim in this article is to foreground audience forms of identification, and attempt to explain those partly in terms of the film's 'regimes of representation', but also in terms of the social, gendered, ethnic backgrounds of my interviewees. In this sense, audience research is an ambitious undertaking since it has to provide an 'authoritative reading' of the film *and* couple this with an analysis of processes of audience reception. One good example of this may be illustrated with reference to Jude Davis's perceptive comparison of the forms of white masculinity in both *Falling Down*, and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993).¹⁹ On the one hand, Davis's analysis provides a powerful explanation of the confusion and complexity within the cinematic structure of *Falling Down* which can and will be used to account for different audience responses in what follows. At the same time, the cultural and iconic significance of Vietnam and Coke, for example, might well be different for an ethnically mixed young British audience. If we can say, as Davis does, that Shumacher's intention and the film's effects do not necessarily coincide, then we ought also to be able to acknowledge that the authoritative reading of the cultural critic and what is understood by different audiences may also not always coincide. My aim is to explore the ways in which cinematic meanings are negotiated through the filter of my interviewees' experiences and predispositions.

In her article on Hollywood stars, Jackie Stacey discusses the various uses of the concept of identification. In psychoanalysis, the term stands for an unconscious mechanism for the production of identities. In Lacan's work, for example, it refers to the means by 'which subjects are constituted through a specular mis-recognition of an *other*'.²⁰ Elsewhere it is used more loosely to refer to watching the film from a particular character's point of view. This in turn can be constructed visually by the shots and the editing, or in terms of the narrative through the positing of shared values and so on.²¹ Processes of identification have either been thought to reproduce dominant culture (racist, patriarchal, capitalist) or they have been explored in

22 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), ch. 3.

terms of their potential to mobilize oppositional or subversive identities. In Walkerdine's study of *Rocky II*, cited above, the metaphor of fighting was taken by its audience to mean fighting against the system. Similarly, Richard Dyer has explored Judy Garland's star image in terms of its distinctive meaning within gay male subculture.²² In this article, I shall explore three distinct levels of identification: behavioural, affective and normative.

In *Falling Down*, points of identification and non-identification with the central character shifted throughout the film, the result of a negotiation between the film's visual constructions and the backgrounds and experiences of its audiences. Everyone with whom I spoke identified powerfully but, importantly, only partially and inconsistently with the situations and, to a lesser extent, with the frustrations, reactions and point of view of the central character. In broad terms, the interviewees built their strongest attachments to the character of D-Fens, and in particular to his role as consumer: as motorist, customer and citizen. These identificatory links were forged in a variety of ways. In some cases, the interviewees linked incidents and the frustrations associated with them to those in their own experience. In other cases, there was a fantasy-identification in situations where D-Fens went further and acted out what interviewees had only imagined (or even wish they had imagined) doing. The D-Fens character thus provided a rich repository for moments of recognition and identification, a series of collisions between the film's structure (expressed through narrative, cinematography and casting) and audiences' backgrounds and experiences. Such collisions resulted in a sense of release on the part of the audience. This was summed up in the following way by Sinead: 'There was a sense of relief each time he did something. That's what you would like to do but you never have the guts to do it . . . like letting all your frustration out through the character.'

Falling Down's success in building such allegiances can be partly attributed to the structure of the narrative, built as it is around the mundane, yet seemingly universal, daily frustrations of contemporary urban life. Traffic jams, shops, restaurants, parks, golf courses and 'home' provide ideal settings for Bill to play the role of 'Mr Ordinary'. It is significant that he is hardly referred to by name (he could be anybody) and is known instead, at least to reviewers and audiences, by his personalized car number plate, D-Fens. Many of his actions are thus made explicable precisely because they are rooted in everyday life. His role as 'John Doe' versus the system, 'doing what he had to do', has a long tradition in Hollywood cinema and is evident across a wide range of genres, including the Western, such as Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and action adventure, such as Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive* (1993). D-Fens's vulnerability, which structures audience propensities to sympathize with him, is partly constructed through the stark juxtaposition of his solitary figure set against a

succession of physical and cultural spaces which refuse to accommodate him. His lone status is compounded by the knowledge that he has lost his job and that his marital family life has ended in divorce and a restraining order. Even his shoe has a hole in it. Other techniques are used to secure some minimal allegiance to the character we think of, inevitably and deliberately, as D-Fens. In those scenes where audiences might be expected to empathize with his adversaries, an 'allegiance switch' is contained, both by the use of humour and by restricting audience access primarily to one point of view – that of D-Fens. For example, farce, more than fear, characterizes the scene in the wammyburger restaurant, in which the waitress and the manager perform a double-act routine as D-Fens decides to order lunch and not breakfast after all.

Both sources and forms of identification are illustrated in the opening scene of the film when D-Fens leaves his car in the middle of a queue of rush-hour traffic. His frustration is evidently exacerbated by both the heat (visually evoked by a combination of bright light shot without a haze filter, rolled-up shirt-sleeves and rolled-down windows) and queues of non-moving freeway traffic. Shot (photographically) from inside his car, he is seen at close quarters as he fails to get his air conditioning to work, accompanied by the constant buzzing of a fly which eventually lands on his perspiring neck. One interviewee, Pat was able to identify herself with his plight: 'I believe it could happen. I mean not the whole thing, just getting out of the car. I could do that . . . leave the keys in it.' Audiences were also partially able to relate to D-Fens, in his role as customer. In the scene in the Korean corner shop, for example, D-Fens asks for change (to telephone Beth, his ex-wife) but is refused. He decides to buy a soda to obtain it, but discovers, because of the price of the drink, he still would not have enough. Commenting on the shop scene, Coca had this to say: 'I laughed at the (scene with the) soda bottle. I sympathized with him then because people do go into a shop and ask for change and they won't give it to you . . . the fact that the drink was eighty-five cents rather than fifty cents meant he couldn't make his call. I think the man could have given him his change.' D-Fens's reaction to all of this was met with less approval, as I will show below, but his initial frustration when refused the change was shared by many. Coca's laughter, which served to strengthen her attachment at that moment, was a function of the comic construction of the scene, the seeming ludicrousness of a situation any one of us might experience when frustrated at every attempt to get change for the phone.

The episode at the wammyburger (one group insisted on calling it McDonald's) also provoked recognition and amusement. Once again everyday complaints, this time against fast-food restaurants, are voiced by D-Fens. According to one interviewee, Dave, 'You sympathize with him 'cause you know how you feel sometimes when you go into McDonald's and people are really nasty to you . . . won't give you

23 Davis, 'Gender, ethnicity and cultural crisis in *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*', p. 215.

what you want and you have to wait twenty minutes for something'; whilst another, Munah, took something else from this scene to register a common frustration: '... and you think why doesn't the burger look like that one over there ... like that one on the picture ... it looks so nice ... but when you order the Big Mac and you look at it and you look at the picture and you think what's wrong with it why is it so different?' The film thus plays on the trappings of consumer culture: the contradictory traits of desire and disbelief, fantasy and frustration. In playing on both, the film enhances its sense of authenticity and hence the identificatory bond between D-Fens and his audience.

Jude Davis argues that *Falling Down* 'goes some way towards redefining racial difference into relations of economic class'.²³ The film, as Davis acknowledges, is only partially successful in this respect, but where it is, its success derives from its ability to draw on a recurrent narrative theme of Hollywood in which individuals pit themselves against an all-powerful state, corrupt or inefficient bureaucracies, or the excesses of corporate or private wealth, such as Sydney Pollack's *The Firm* (1993). Those episodes in the film in which D-Fens took on 'the system' are thus able to elicit audience recognition and support. In *Falling Down* these invariably re-enact class antagonisms which cut across racial divisions. For example, the expression 'not economically viable', which is used by D-Fens to describe himself, is taken from a placard belonging to an African-American. Likewise, the scene on the golf course encourages audiences to ally themselves with D-Fens in his 'de-fence' of working-class interests against the rich and the powerful. In this instance, the golfers' sense of aloofness and pomposity (as they look down on D-Fens) work against any possible audience allegiance. On top of this, the scene takes a comic turn, which further serves to distance the audience from the golfers, as one of their party agitates himself into a coronary state, only to see his golf cart, with life-saving pills on board, disappear into the lake. The situation could only work as comedy for the audience, as indeed it did, as long as the golfer's fate was seen as just deserts for his selfishness and greed. The class war waged on the golf course is followed by an incident in the garden of a plastic surgeon which also works on ideas of class privilege and the absurdities and injustices of inequalities of wealth. As such, both scenes helped to win temporary audience support for D-Fens, notably for the way he stood for the less affluent and vulnerable sections of society. It also allowed some interviewees to identify more closely with a version of national identity they had come to associate with D-Fens. Amongst the interviewees was a group of social workers, one of whom, Bill, commented on the difference between the golf course and the scenes which preceded it.

In the golf course scene you were compelled to agree with him ... there was something obscene after all those shots of south LA all

that depravity and deprivation, these very unpleasant white Americans, particularly the one who was demanding his territory.

D-Fens struck a particular chord with Pat when he commented on the lack of public access for children. 'He said there should be children playing here and I remember saying "hear! hear!"' Coca linked this scene to the one immediately following, and based her support on his perceived moral superiority over the golfers and plastic surgeons. In her view, the legitimacy of his views was based partly on his commitment to make spaces open to the public and partly on his job with the Defence Department.

There is him defending his country. He had nothing and yet here's this plastic surgeon and golfers. What had they done for the country? I sympathize with him again because on a golf course . . . it would be nice, families and picnics and all. That would be great!

The scene in the garden of the plastic surgeon allows D-Fens to demonstrate both his protectiveness towards children and commitment to the (white) nuclear family as well as his vulnerability. It also provides a space for one of many appeals for a return to the way things used to be, part of the universal and recurrent cinematic theme of 'going home' explored in such films as *Fatal Attraction*. Whilst the history highlighted in *Falling Down* is invariably tailored to resonate for a white male audience – Los Angeles before Asian and Latino immigration, a time when shop prices were low, when there were jobs and the enemy was communism – nostalgia with a more idealized appeal is captured in the snowflake-filled glass ornaments which, in D-Fens's case, play the same tune ('London Bridge is Falling Down' [sic]) as the one Prendergast keeps in his drawer at work. Despite the film's attempts to make a coherent past of these verbal and visual evocations, it is a past which only ever partially appeals to its audiences.

Although various comments were made regarding D-Fens's job with the Defence Department, most linked this to the way in which the film played on ideas of national identity and patriotism (I shall return to this below). Only one interviewee made a reference to D-Fens in terms of his lack of employment. Moreover, Dave thought this was the clue to his behaviour:

I thought he cracked because he couldn't live up to people's expectations of him. He couldn't afford to. He was 'not economically viable' any more. They lied to him . . . he was, what was it, over-qualified and under-educated and they dumped him. He couldn't hack it no more.

The absence of specific references to unemployment, other than Dave's above, may have something to do with the age profile of those interviewed. Aside from the group of social workers, who appeared

well-established and economically secure, the interviewees were too young to have experienced mid-career unemployment directly or, as students, may not have had a chance to test their qualifications on the labour market. On the other hand, many expressed views premised on an understanding of differences in wealth and privilege which suggested that their employment experiences, or at least those of their families, bore some resemblance to those of D-Fens. Dave, on the other hand, who was in his mid twenties, and not in full-time employment, may well have been drawing on his own experience, or that of someone close to him, in the above quote.

From the above comments it would appear that the mechanisms of identification within the film worked on audiences at a number of levels. The first was the extent to which interviewees recognized themselves in the familiar, everyday *behaviours* – activities and roles – which punctuated the film: shopping, walking, using a public phone, waiting in traffic, going to a fast food restaurant. In addition to the recognition these elicited, there was a deeper set of *affective* or emotional responses – including frustration, resentment, anger, impatience and bitterness – all of which served to strengthen the initial bonds of identification. Thirdly, both the activities and the emotions were bound together by a set of *values* which, in the case of *Falling Down*, were invoked and accepted much more unevenly. Cultural values around which there was a broad consensus centred on the individual and, in particular, his rights as a consumer and citizen, although not everyone condoned his actions. Other values invoked to a lesser degree included patriotism, which was alluded to by one or two of the interviewees in order to add moral weight both to D-Fens's reactions and, by inference, to their own. Elsewhere, however, comments indicated a more selective and cautious identification and sometimes rejection of what were interpreted as the film's value statements. I shall now move on to consider examples of such tensions.

The wariness with which many interviewees reacted to the D-Fens character is nowhere better illustrated than in response to those actions to which they attributed racist motives. For some this meant that incidents had to be interpreted carefully, as a result of which identification was possible only on a qualified basis. At least one interviewee felt betrayed because of the racist values he increasingly associated with the D-Fens character. On the other hand, one or two incidents in the film enabled some interviewees to distinguish between *patriotism*, which they both understood and accepted in connection with D-Fens, and *racism*, which, in their view, was located elsewhere in the film. For a minority, D-Fens was seen as a utopian visionary, not a racist but a humanitarian committed to universalism rather than the values underpinning the creation of barriers between people. Finally, there were those who rejected these distinctions and made a direct link between D-Fens's sense of national identity and what they

understood as racism. Such contradictory feelings in part result from what Jude Davis describes as the undermining of the universalizing tendencies of the film by 'racial categorizations . . . and internal fissures and contradictions within the film's construction of masculinity'.²⁴ However, the precise ways in which these contradictions are understood depends on reception processes and cultural factors peculiar to specific audiences.

Virtually all the interviewees expressed some reservations about D-Fens and the values he embodied. No-one approved of him without reservation, and many ultimately rejected him because of what they believed he stood for. For some, their sympathy declined throughout the film. In Dave's case this felt tantamount to a betrayal. He expressed this view in the following way:

I hated myself in the end for liking him in the first place. I really did 'cause he was like a hero at first, but at the end I hated myself. I was thinking 'why the hell did I like him?' He's no hero. I didn't like him at all. I heard in America white middle-class audiences were giving a standing ovation, but I can't see that myself.

For others it was more a matter of being selective. For example, the incident in the Korean corner shop provoked mixed and qualified reactions. Whilst some sympathized with the price rises and sided with D-Fens in his attempts to get change for the phone, they felt uncomfortable with the way he deals with his anger, that is by abusing the shopkeeper and then proceeding to smash up his store. In this moment D-Fens loses his victim status and becomes a violator. That look of terror, captured on the storekeeper's face as he lies on the floor (with D-Fens wielding his baseball bat) pleading with D-Fens to take the money, prompted some to change their mind. Coca, who was quoted above approving of his actions in the store qualified them immediately when she stated:

I don't think he had the right to go mad over it; to violate somebody's property. He had no right to do that. I mean OK, he might have fought in the Korean war but he also has to think about the Koreans who fought the Americans. It's not just one sided. It's two sided and I don't think he saw the point of the man. I mean that man's got a corner shop, his own area, not causing no problem and this guy comes in, just smashes up his shop. There was no need for it. I don't think he had to go through all that.

She concluded by turning the stereotype back on the white male: 'Its like he (D-Fens) had a chip on his shoulder, I think, when he smashed the shop. That showed his racial anger at the Korean guy.' In other words, Coca identified with the Korean shopkeeper either as a consequence of her own direct experience of racism and/or her sensitivity to it. It was interesting that both Linda and Stuart also felt ambivalent towards the shop scene, a point Linda linked explicitly to

their backgrounds (Linda was born in Hong Kong, Stuart in Malaysia). In Linda's own words,

What he (D-Fens) did at the shop was not justified. That guy charges everyone eighty-five cents for a Coke. I didn't think the shop deserved anything. Perhaps because we both come from the East, a lot of shopkeepers are rude. Then when he said 'it's my country, we've put so much money into Korea', I thought 'oh God is there going to be some sort of racial thing?'.

Stuart also reacted angrily to the same incident, as the following statement confirms:

The scene in the shop offended me. When he said, 'you walk into my country and you're sucking up the benefits here and we're paying you', all this, it made me very angry. The Korean guy was so rude, but at the same time, he's got his own little shop. He's working hard to make a living and it was a bit too much to smash up the shop. It was not right at all.

Linda and David felt unhappy with the portrayal of the Korean whose rudeness they felt encouraged a degree of sympathy with D-Fens's behaviour. However, their own appreciation of how hard the Korean must have worked, and what his business would have meant to him, made the destruction seem all the less defensible. On the other hand, Sally had no difficulty in distancing herself from the actions of D-Fens in the Korean shop. Moreover, in the following extract she gives another possible reason why D-Fens might have alienated his audience, at the moment when his racism was exposed as ignorance.

The scene fitted in with the film but I didn't like it. It was a bit racist. When he said 'Do you know how much my country has given your country?' and the shopkeeper didn't know, but he didn't know either, so he's getting all angry but he doesn't know the answer to it himself.

Jude Davis's account of the Korean store scene makes a lot of sense in the USA, and particularly Los Angeles, but perhaps less so in a British context. According to Davis, D-Fens's accusations of inflationary prices aimed at an Asian entrepreneur provide the textual basis for a rightwing explanation of the 'crisis' (for national crisis read white male crisis) in which economic problems are directly attributable to Asian immigration. A more liberal reading which, according to Davis, is also possible, might condemn the anti-Asianness of the scene, but not recognize the coded racism inscribed in the dispute over the price of Coke. For Davis, the struggle over the cost of a can of Coke is actually about the control of a product which connotes US superiority and dominance.²⁵ Moreover, Davis goes on to argue that the specific targeting of Asians illustrated in this scene, when contrasted with a series of amicable encounters

²⁵ Ibid., p. 231.

between D-Fens and African-Americans, defines the film's 'racial message' in both ethnically specific and economic terms. This, he argues, enhances the film's complexity and limits its potential as a straightforward piece of 'whitelash' culture.

My interviewees, on the other hand, responded in ways which call for a different kind of reading again. Economically and demographically, south east Asians do not play the same roles, nor are they represented in the same numbers, in Birmingham as in cities like Los Angeles. Hence *Falling Down* is much less likely to consolidate a broad-based, black/white, anti-Korean alliance in Britain than it is perhaps in the USA. On the contrary, what united my interviewees was their almost unanimous condemnation of what was recognized as an act of racism. Their consistent foregrounding of the racial element in this scene no doubt reflected the regularity of their own experiences of racism. The absence of any reference to Coke was not so much coded racism on their part as the commodity's lack of symbolic (at least in terms of US national identity) significance for them. Overall, I would argue, these differences inevitably reflect the particularities of a young, ethnically mixed British audience.

The incident in the army surplus store proved decisive for a number of interviewees in terms of their attachment to D-Fens. In constructing an overtly racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic character in the store keeper, played by Frederic Forrest, the film encourages its audience to reassess the D-Fens character. Indeed, D-Fens's defence of democratic, liberal US values in his confrontation with the neo-Nazi, momentarily restored his legitimacy in the minds of some of my interviewees. According to Linda, the neo-Nazi character helped to normalize D-Fens's actions and neutralize his racism. As she continued, immediately following on from her assessment of the shop scene, '... but then when he was in the army surplus store ... I realised he's not racist at all. He's American and he's proud to be American.' Theodore, although not part of Linda's group, agreed with her almost word for word:

The neo-Nazi was totally different. He was a racist. He hated black people and Jews and gays. I felt they were different because he was a racist and quite extreme whereas Michael Douglas was basically standing up for his country, what he believed in.

Both Linda's and Theodore's comments on the store scenes illustrate the ways in which the film seeks to redeem its central character, in this instance by juxtaposing him alongside a fascist. The fact that D-Fens's targets subsequently include whites – at the telephone booth, the road-works, the golf course and in the garden of the plastic surgeon – encouraged Mohan and others to retract their initial suspicions of racism. It was as if D-Fens the anti-Nazi, the patriot, the citizen, served to hide D-Fens the racist.

Not everyone, however, accepted the film's efforts to normalize the

actions of D-Fens using the neo-fascist as a foil, nor, relatedly, the assumption that patriotism and national pride are as innocent as they might appear. As Jude Davis states, already 'there are signs that D-Fens has certain cultural complicities with the neo-Nazi'²⁶ (for example in the Korean shop). The film's ambivalence in this respect was reflected in the divergent reactions of my interviewees. When I asked 'Why did he kill the storekeeper?', Dave replied, 'He couldn't stand to see his reflection in the other bloke. It scared him to know he was like that bloke (the neo-Nazi). That's why he killed him.' For a while, the anti-gay anti-Semitic rantings of the storekeeper give D-Fens a chance to restore his credibility. Instead, the fatal multiple shot wounds he ultimately inflicts on the storekeeper only serve to mirror the psychopathic tendencies of his adversary.

In another context, D-Fens's version of national identity was called into question. Coca made the following point in response to the argument with the Korean shopkeeper in which D-Fens talked about the USA as if the Korean were an outsider. On the contrary, Coca stated, 'It's not his country. He defines the country just for him, whereas it's everybody's.' Likewise, Bill certainly saw this incident as evidence of racism and not some racially neutral sense of patriotism. This is what he said:

Yeh, the stuff with the Korean. Why he wanted to go back to 1965, not because the prices were lower but because he (the Korean) didn't own the corner shop and he didn't tell him (D-Fens) what the prices were. It was going back to another age when there hadn't been an enormous influx of Asian immigration into America.

In a similar vein, John was adamant that when he spoke about 'his' country, 'he was going back to another age when everyone was white'. Instead of understanding his plight in terms of the forces around him (cultural diversity, corporate wealth) and over which he had little control, Coca took the idea of D-Fens as a victim (a common interpretation of the film in the USA) and lent it another quite different meaning. If anyone was to blame, it was D-Fens. In her own words, 'he was a victim to himself'.

Despite D-Fens's ability to both attract and repel my interviewees which, as I've suggested, was a measure of the film's ambivalent structure, there was an interesting consensus amongst them that, overriding all else, the film successfully pathologized whiteness, in both its masculine and, to a lesser extent, feminine forms. This was particularly true for those of south Asian, south-east Asian, African-Caribbean and ethnically mixed backgrounds. Far from forging links across ethnic groups in class terms, as Jude Davis suggests, the film succeeded, amongst my interviewees at least, in forging audience links across ethnicities and in racial terms. The D-Fens character was thereby simultaneously pathologized and racialized, a process made possible by both the film's representational structure and the cultural

Falling Down (Warner Bros):
 'No-one expects someone in a
 white shirt to go around doing
 things like that'. Mohan,
 interviewee. Picture courtesy:
 BFI Stills



experiences of its young, mixed British audience. According to Munah, 'it shows you one thing. At the end of the day, its not just the blacks and the Asians who lose it. You can have white people as well.' Mohan also acknowledged this apparent role reversal. In doing so it is interesting how he emphasized the whiteness of D-Fens's shirt.

No-one expects someone in a white shirt to go round doing things like that. Everyone expects gang members wearing rough clothes to do things like that, but it's not always the case. It was breaking stereotypes, so ordinary people, so-called, who go round in white shirts and ties do think like that and they are capable of that.

Another way of thinking about this is to speculate on the film with a black actor playing D-Fens. According to Sally, had this been the case, it would have undoubtedly served to reinforce stereotypes of black violence and criminality. As it was, the pathological boot for once was on the other foot. In Sally's own words,

If it had been a black person doing Michael Douglas's role people would probably have seen it as a racist thing. . . . I would probably have been offended if it had been a black character . . . cause you think it's more likely a black man going on like that . . . it would be a kind of racist thing.

Theodore noticed one consequence of this role reversal in the following incident in the police station:

He [the Puerto Rican cop] couldn't believe that a white middle-class male would shoot someone of a lower class. Why would a middle-class male shoot somebody from the street? . . . he couldn't understand it, you see.

For black and, to a much lesser extent, white interviewees, *Falling Down* provided an interesting and welcome observation on white pathology which, at the same time, did not prevent them from strongly identifying with other aspects of the character. The coincidence of sympathy and antipathy for the same character was not perceived as contradictory in the least, which only confirms the complexity of processes of identification. One important way in which the D-Fens character was understood, somewhere along a continuum from normal to pathological, was by putting him up against two other white male characters: Prendergast and the army surplus storekeeper. A number of similarities between Prendergast and D-Fens were noted. They both set out in the morning on the same highway and are both caught in the same traffic jam. Both have daughters to whom they are denied access – Prendergast because she has died in childhood, and D-Fens because of a restraining order. Prendergast is about to leave his job and leave Los Angeles for the desert. D-Fens has already lost his job. There is something about the way events unfold during the course of the day which makes the crossing of their paths almost inevitable. Even their musical ornaments play the same tune. According to Dave,

they were both loners, even though Prendergast was married, he wasn't very happily married. He seemed to be a loner at work. I think if Prendergast had been in D-Fens's position and lost his job he would have gone over the edge as well.

Toby saw a sense in which D-Fens and Prendergast were coming closer together, both literally, in terms of the meeting on the pier, and in terms of their characters. By the end, Prendergast is beginning to acquire some pathological traits of his own. In Toby's words, 'at the very end, when he [Prendergast] had punched down his boss and sworn on TV, D-Fens was creeping into him'. This occurred to Stuart too: 'when he struck the other cop it looked like he was developing into the Michael Douglas character'. The above observations suggest that it is Prendergast who is moving to the edge himself after blasting D-Fens over it with a bullet. Actually, Prendergast's suggestion that his Japanese police officer colleague might be able to communicate with the Korean shopkeeper, his assumption that they are culturally the same because they are both of Asian background, provides an interesting parallel with D-Fens's own encounter in the corner shop. In Stuart's words, 'Yeh, I picked up on that immediately. I've experienced that as well. People said to me "you're all the same".' Munah also linked this to his own experience: 'People I know can hardly differentiate. They ask me if I'm a Muslim and then they expect my friend to be a Muslim because that's all they know. If they think I'm a Hindu then the next person will be a Hindu.'

The film, as Jude Davis rightly points out, defines difference predominantly around language and ethnicity (such as the incidents in the Korean store, and D-Fens's fight with the Latino gang members).

When it is also remembered that two of D-Fens's allies are in fact African-American (the 'economically non viable' placard-waver referred to before, and the boy who showed him how to use the bazooka), there is all the more reason to agree with Davis that the preoccupation with aspects of cultural difference, rather than a straightforward racialization of skin colour, undermines racial binaries in *Falling Down*. The successful Proposition 187 campaign to end education, health and welfare rights for illegal immigrants in California in 1994, which targeted, above all, those of Asian and Latino background, would also appear to weaken a potential alliance of minority groups. However, my interviewees were clearly less responsive to appeals to ethnic and linguistic allegiances. Their own readings effectively racialized the film's narrative and, moreover, in ways which pathologized rather than celebrated the whiteness of its main character.

There was more discussion and disagreement around the neo-Nazi character. Some felt the scene in his shop, which ended with D-Fens shooting him dead, confirmed the difference between them: D-Fens was normal and not a racist, the neo-Nazi was homophobic and a racist. Stuart thought the key difference was that the neo-Nazi was a psychopath, whereas for Toby the character was a disturbing reminder of the prevalence of far-right extremism: 'The scene with the Nazi shopkeeper, when you first watch it it's entertaining, then you think about it . . . you've got things like the BNP, there are actually people like that out there'. Others saw more subtle similarities between them. According to Dave, D-Fens shot him precisely because he saw himself in the neo-Nazi. Coca also thought that:

In a way they were related . . . they both had the same ideas . . . he worked for defence . . . this other one was a patriot of Hitler. . . . There was a similarity when he changed into military uniform . . . so that man's belief rubbed off on him . . . that man brought something out of the Michael Douglas character . . . gave him an idea like he was defending his country . . . it had gone to his head.²⁷

Likewise for Pat, 'Both had the same prejudices . . . both were like vigilantes. . . . It was just that D-Fens tried to pretend they were different.' The fact that the neo-Nazi is the only person D-Fens actually kills (as far as we know, although he does help the golfer on his way) suggests the psychological impact of this particular encounter on him. Moreover, Dave's idea that D-Fens 'couldn't stand to see his reflection in the other bloke' suggests how processes of recognition and misrecognition within the film articulated with identificatory patterns amongst members of its audience.

Whereas the male characters, and D-Fens in particular, could be thought about independently of their relationships to women, female characters are invariably represented in the film in terms of their subordinate/dependent relationships with men, their traditional role in

²⁷ Although John and Bill, two of the social workers, put this more simply down to fear of being picked up from an eye-witness description.

The military uniform . . . gave him an idea he was defending his country . . . it had gone to his head.' Coca, interviewee.
Picture courtesy: BFI Stills.



nuclear families (Beth, D-Fens's ex-wife), or even, in the case of Prendergast's police partner (played by Rachel Ticotin), as a string to his bow. The recurrent theme of 'going home' is linked, in D-Fens's mind at least, to happier family times when going home meant home to wife and child after a day's work. Michael Douglas's role in *Fatal Attraction* might have also encouraged audiences to expect a more blissful family reunion, whatever mayhem had preceded it.

It was significant to note that, with the exception of the social workers, criticisms were targeted at the female characters themselves, rather than the way in which the film represented women. Sally's idea

of killing off Beth, D-Fens's wife, played by Barbara Hershey, was an extreme example of this lack of empathy. Others felt similarly ill-disposed towards both her and other women in the film. Sinead, for example, at someone's suggestion 'that . . . Beth was right to be concerned about her ex-husband's return', replied 'yeh, but she was married to him. She should have known what he was like as a person. She should be able to offer some kind of help. She was almost like a stranger.' Sally felt similarly agitated by Prendergast's relationship with his wife, played by Tuesday Weld, only this time she turned her frustration against Prendergast: 'I found him [Prendergast] quite frustrating. I wanted him to give her a real good telling off. It was really irritating to see him so humble.' The film's focus on Prendergast, and not his wife, reflected the relative understanding of the couple's respective situations. The audience only knew about his wife through Prendergast himself and from her phone calls which interrupted his attempts to solve the case. Again, the relationship provoked the following response from Linda, although it was less clear for her whether it was the character or its representation that caused offence. 'I felt he should have stood up more to his wife. I was angry, I didn't like the way she was portrayed . . . I wish he could just have said 'I'll call you back'. I suppose he did in the end . . . he was weak.' The character of Prendergast's wife, portrayed as nagging and neurotic, invited yet another similar response from Munah, who clearly saw things from Prendergast's standpoint: 'You've got a busy day at work and your wife keeps on phoning you all the time and the last thing you want to hear is your wife on the phone moaning at this and that'. Such constructions inevitably meant that Prendergast's ultimate reassertion of good old-fashioned masculinity was met with relief and celebration by some.

There was a second reaction to gender which was aimed, less ambiguously, at representations of women. In fact, according to John, one of the social-worker group, gender relations lay at the heart of the film, and in forms which he did not find disagreeable. In his own words, 'I think you can say a lot more about it around gender than you could about race It was much more about family values . . . parenthood, childhood, stuff to a degree I could sympathize with.' What he responded to, perhaps not surprisingly given his professional background, was the threat of domestic violence and child abuse. He continued,

I thought one of the best parts was when the officer was questioning her, you know, a really callous male, and she couldn't define his [D-Fens's] violence or intimidation. I thought that was really persuasive, a really good way of saying you don't actually have to do anything, you don't have to lay hands, you don't have to raise your voice to be really intimidating.

James was also convinced by Beth's concerns and relatedly what was

taken to be the failure of the police to grasp the urgency of the situation. His reaction was partly structured by various cinematic constructions. For example, D-Fens's phone conversation to Beth from the surplus store is not only accompanied by a menacing musical score but, as the camera circles around D-Fens, we see a backdrop of old rockets, guns, military uniforms and empty cans of cyclon B. Moreover, Beth's fears, if not founded in actual physical violence, are also captured in another moment: in her terrorized stare into the home video camera, as D-Fens, the cameraman, shouts at her to put their daughter 'on the goddam [rocking] horse'. According to James,

You can sympathize with her. She'd sensed the point where next time he'll hit me, and to save her going through that . . . she took things into her own hands. I could see her reasoning why she didn't let him have access to her daughter. . . . I don't think the police officer could understand.

The third and final response to gender-related issues illustrated the potential effect of a group discussion on previously held assumptions and reactions. This was best shown in the discussion with Sinead, Sally and Gurbax. When one of them commented on the absence of central female characters, Sally (who it should be remembered, had wanted Barbara Hershey killed off) commented,

Yeah, the women were quite weak characters. The main characters were D-Fens and Prendergast Like Prendergast's wife, she was featured as a baby and dependent on the husband, Michael Douglas's wife was scared of him, the girl in the car crash was like hysterical and crying out 'go to the hospital!'

Sinead took up this point immediately, when she said, 'all the women were dependent on men. D-Fens's wife was dependent on the police to protect her, and the Hispanic cop, she was the one who got injured so Prendergast could go alone to sort it out.'

The evidence from the interviews underlines the importance of extending film criticism beyond textual analysis to include audience-based studies and, moreover, not to take media reporting of audience reactions at face value. Whatever the responses of audiences in the USA – and they were surely more complex than the reported celebration/acknowledgement of white victimhood – an ethnically mixed British audience appeared selective and discerning in its allegiances. Furthermore, in contrast to what was reported in the USA, it was precisely at those moments when D-Fens's whiteness was most visible that British audiences turned against him. D-Fens was a popular figure when he appeared as a motorist in traffic jams, unemployed, Joe Public wanting access to private land, an irate fast-food customer and so on. In this sense, his white male status arguably only worked insofar as it remained hidden. It is possible that, at a covert (invisible) level, his whiteness lent credibility to his

campaigning role. 'Mr. Ordinary' is, after all, 'normally' white. In contrast, when he did visibly play his white card, in the Korean corner shop for example, or when he talked about 'his America' and it was understood to mean white America, then allegiance and identification evaporated. When the home video (which he watched in his ex-wife's house) confirmed, to many, his latent propensity to violence, he lost them again. These fluctuating allegiances were made possible, in narrative terms, by the episodic form of the film which allowed audiences to identify on a short-term basis, depending on the particularities of a scene and how it was understood. Yet ultimately many rejected D-Fens because, on balance, those moments of empathy were minor by comparison with what repelled them: his sense of national identity.

It's not his country . . . what he didn't realise is that areas he was going were like a close-knit community, like the guy said on the hill, 'it's our patch', and in America, I mean, all groups have their own patches . . . just some are worse off than others.

'Territory' and 'space' were the terms used by Baudrillard to redefine racism, but it is possible that this has a peculiarly north American significance. *Falling Down* is quintessentially a film about territory and space, boundaries and difference. My interviewees rejected D-Fens's attempt to tie national identity to something in the past. Instead, their own cultural experiences point in the opposite direction where national and ethnic allegiances are dynamic and shifting, despite the best efforts of the British National Party and the Conservative Government to say otherwise. Identification patterns were thus dynamic, shifting and fractured not just because of the complexities and tensions in the film, but because its teenage/twenty-something audience perceived themselves in ways which transcended traditional or exclusive ethnic, class or city-based allegiances.

The film's pleasures are clearly produced in those moments of recognition. These are very much linked to the episodic form of the narrative and are built around specific situations and the emotional responses they provoke. Sometimes these directly mirror situations encountered by the interviewees, for example in the traffic jam. Sometimes the form they take is transferable to other contexts. The ambiguity of the genre, at least as far as my audience sample were concerned, works both for and against the film. The absence of sustained good guy/bad guy opposition (vigilantes and/or police officers have characteristically played these roles) was a source of ambivalence for some. The film is not an action adventure, crime thriller or a romantic comedy (although there is a hint of romance and, as I have suggested, humour plays an important role in the construction of forms of identification). The film could also be read in terms of the now familiar theme of the imminent destruction of the

nuclear family, in the style of *Fatal Attraction*, culminating in reconciliation and a new beginning. When asked to sum up *Falling Down*, interviewees often described it as a man's efforts to reunite with his family. In this case, however, there is no happy ending. The nuclear family is destroyed. Nor, it must be said, for most interviewees, was reconciliation hoped for or expected, with the exception of Linda. However, the frustrations and disappointments with regard to genre and narrative strengthened the film's sense of *affective* 'realism' for its audience. In other words, its 'truthful', 'honest' portrayal, as people saw it, necessitated the abandonment of 'fictional' genres and narratives and served to strengthen the forms of recognition and pleasures illustrated above.

The episodic and transitory forms of identification and recognition provided audiences with much greater scope to select, negotiate and contest the film's interpellations. This encouraged, for example, black women on occasion to identify with a white male. It also enabled white men to reject precisely those moments when they were being hailed as white men, for example in the Korean shop. How and why the film worked in these specific ways can be understood by going outside the film text to what can be described as the social and institutional (as well as cultural, including cinematic) contexts into which the film is inscribed. Audiences 'go to work' on a film with a repertoire of discourses linked to these contexts. For example, the group of social workers understood the film in very specific ways which, they themselves acknowledged, had to do with their own professional discourse. Their sensitivity to child abuse and domestic violence illustrated the ways in which discourses were invoked from outside and mobilized to make sense of the film.

In so far as the film was concerned with the construction and affirmation of white male identities, it had only limited success, at least in terms of the evidence here. On the contrary, if there was a dominant response, it was articulated in terms of the pathologies associated with whiteness, not the virtues. Moreover, it was not just D-Fens's whiteness that was found wanting. Ironically, D-Fens was arguably at his most popular with his audience not in the Korean shop or the wasteland with the Latino gang members, but on the golf course where he confronted another version of white masculinity. In this scene, the golfers were more conspicuously white than D-Fens himself, not just because their whiter-than-white outfits outshone D-Fens's battledress, but also because their whiteness was associated with the affluence and exclusivity of the golf-course setting, which in terms of the film's narrative, followed scenes set in areas of high black and Latino populations. Audiences thus sided with D-Fens against this privilege which, in its context in the film, appeared almost obscene. According to Munah: 'On the golf course he (D-Fens) thought they should let him in because he was white, but he was a minority but he never saw that'. This point was underlined by

Madelaine who associated US national identity not simply with being white, but with being white and privileged: 'It was only your America if you could do what you want . . . if you've got the money. He was in the wrong job.'

Ironically, the sense in which D-Fens's character appeared pathological to its (British) audience made it less fearful. The flaws in his personality, the fact that it was he who 'lost it', 'flipped', 'went over the edge', served to abnormalize whiteness and, by the same token, depathologize blackness. To go back to and adapt Fanon, it was now the turn of whites to be 'objectified'. Both Munah and Mohan believed the film served to 'reverse the stereotype', a fact clearly appreciated by some members of its black British audience. At the same time, the complex forms of identification with the D-Fens character suggest, for some audiences at least, he was able to escape his whiteness, his maleness, and appeal to them in other indentificatory capacities. His common-sense understandings and the reasonings behind his actions were both readily accessible and understandable to many. His death, falling backwards over the rotten pier timbers into the ocean, seemed a final redemption, if not of his actions, at least of the frustrations and anxieties which underpinned them.

The film thus served to disassemble whiteness. On the evidence of this research, whiteness is not a unitary perspective and/or something which 'white-skinned' people automatically possess. It is broken down in class and gendered terms and it provides openings for its audiences to align themselves and to be *hailed* in complex and fluctuating ways, which the film, through its episodic structure, characterization, script, cinematography and music, served to reinforce. At times, D-Fens successfully speaks to black women, not because he is a white male, but because there is more to him than these two facts alone. In this sense it is not surprising that the chronicle of D-Fens's own last journey, the narrative basis of the film, actually helps to 'position' its audience in what Deleuze and Guattari call 'nomadic' terms.²⁸

²⁸ This idea, suggestive of the fluctuating, shifting or roving positionings of an audience, is cited in Janice Radway, 'Reception study: ethnography and the problem of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1988).

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Interviewees

Dave, 24, male, white, from Northfield	David, 24, male, white, from Northfield, FE student
Munah, 20, south Asian, from Handsworth	Sally, female, mixed parentage, from Nechells
Bill, 37, male, white, social worker	Toby, 18, male, white, from Redditch, FE student
Pat, 32, female, white, social worker	James, 18 male, white, from Handsworth
Sinead, 19, female, white, from Longbridge	John, 33, male, white, social worker
Mohan, 18, male, from Handsworth, student	Madelaine, 28, female, white, social worker
Linda, 23 female, south-east Asian (from Hong Kong), doctor	Gurbax, female, south Asian, from Handsworth.
Stuart, 20, male, south-east Asian (from Malaysia), HE student	
Coca, 25, female, mixed parentage, from Shard End, cinema attendant	
Theodore, 28, male, African Caribbean, from Handsworth, graphic designer	

Moved to tears: weeping in the cinema in postwar Britain

SUE HARPER and VINCENT PORTER

- 1 Robert C. Allen, 'From exhibition to reception: reflections on the audience in film history', *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1990), pp. 347–56; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 2 Annette Kuhn, 'Mandy and possibility', *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1992), pp. 233–43; Jackie Stacey, 'Textual obsessions', *Screen*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1993), pp. 269–74; and 'Hollywood memories', *Screen*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1994), pp. 217–335; Susannah Radstone, 'Cinema/memory/history', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1995), pp. 34–47.
- 3 Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: 'Gone With the Wind' and its Female Fans* (London: Virago, 1989); Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 4 An extended, and more detailed, quantitative breakdown of individual responses by the present authors has been published as an Occasional Paper by the Mass-Observation Archive, under the title *Weeping in the Cinema in 1950. A Reassessment of Mass-Observation Material*.

In the last five years, there has been some innovative and radical work on audience response to film. Robert C. Allen laid out the ground for an anthropology of audience response in 1990, and Miriam Hansen's book on spectatorship and silent film combined the issues of visual literacy and the mass audience.¹ Some scholars have raised the issue of popular memory and film response.² Valuable work on women in British cinema audiences of the 1940s and 1950s has been done by Jackie Stacey and Helen Taylor, who analysed in detail a range of written responses to films.³ However, there is also an extensive survey of British audience responses which was made in 1950, and which has been hitherto neglected. This survey, which was conducted by Mass-Observation, reveals a wealth of challenging material, and, as we shall show, stimulates debate about gender, class and age difference in matters of aesthetic taste, and permits tentative conclusions to be drawn about the social and psychological function of film in the postwar period.

In August 1950, Mass-Observation asked its volunteer panel of respondents whether they ever cried in the cinema, and if so, whether they were ashamed. The original replies to the Directive are still available at the Mass-Observation Archive in the University of Sussex.⁴

Mass-Observation received 318 replies to its questionnaire, 193 from men and 125 from women. The sample was therefore more heavily weighted towards men than the general population of England and

Wales. Most of the respondents were under fifty, and the sample privileged young adults of both sexes and under-represented the old. It was also heavily skewed towards the administrative professions, and took very little account of those working in manual occupations.

The Mass-Observation responses, therefore, cannot be seen as representative of the population as a whole, in terms of class and gender spread. Furthermore, great care must be taken before ascribing 'typicality' to the respondents, since their very willingness to be committed to monthly Mass-Observation questions suggests they had an unusually strong taste for self-analysis and self-expression. Another determining factor on the replies for August 1950 was that the question on film in the Mass-Observation directive was preceded by one about the emotional effects of music. Many respondents wrote at great length about that, and their emotional temperature had clearly been raised before they answered the 'crying' question. The responses were unusually intense when compared to other types of Mass-Observation replies. Their emotional 'rawness' can perhaps be ascribed to the potent combination of the autobiographical mode with a concentration on musical and visual pleasures; this caused the 'crying' responses to read, in some cases, like a personal catharsis.

Respondents' memories functioned in a highly selective way, and to a certain extent their recall of the films which made them cry was probably determined by a combination of subjective experience and unconscious processes, which are difficult to quantify. Nonetheless it is possible to suggest from this Mass-Observation evidence that memories of key scenes from films gave respondents a kind of fast-track access to emotional high points in their lives. The films prompted intense emotional arousal on viewing, and then a second time in the act of retelling. Jackie Stacey has argued that, for women, films have a particularly privileged role in the construction of 'treasured memories'. She suggests that these operate as transformative moments in an individual's experience, and construct a personal utopia which offers escape from everyday life.⁵ The Mass-Observation material does not contradict this, but it suggests that film's power to transform the individual's life is strongly determined by the class and gender of the viewer, and to a lesser extent by their age. Moreover, the intense experiences prompted by films seemed to provide significant peaks in the memories of the respondents, and they affected the manner in which they interpreted the meaning of their lives. The viewers in this sample assessed films according to the intensity of response they provoked, rather than the narrative or visual pleasure they provided.

5 Stacey, *Star Gazing*, p. 64.

When Mass-Observation asked its respondents whether they ever cried in the cinema, it was using a scientifically imprecise term. For although the word *crying* was used in common parlance to include a

6 Arthur Koestler, 'The logic of the moist eye', in *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), ch. XII, pp. 271–2; see also, Dalbir Bindra, 'Weeping: a problem of many facets', *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, no. 25 (1972), pp. 281–4.

wide range of physiological activities, the term used by most scientists is that of *weeping*, which can vary in intensity from a lump in the throat, by way of a moistening of the eye, to tears accompanied by sobbing.⁶ Many male Mass-Observation respondents deployed a very narrow definition of crying, which excluded the earlier stages of weeping.

I can't remember crying in the pictures and if I did, I should certainly feel ashamed of myself for doing so. I will confess to the occasional 'lump in the throat'. (Insurance clerk, 40)

I cannot recall ever having cried in the pictures though once or twice I think a film has brought a lump to my throat. (Chartered accountant, 30)

For some men, even watery eyes fell outside their definition of crying:

I have on occasion been moved to a wet eye – but never to tears. (Civil servant, 28)

I would never admit to crying in the pictures though I have often had to stifle back what were suspiciously like tears. (Student, 35)

Such defensiveness and prescriptiveness about the act of weeping was entirely absent from the women's replies. They presented the relationship between artistic experience and emotional arousal as much more straightforward. The men seemed to feel that the wholeness and security of their personalities was threatened by the act of crying, whereas the women conceived of themselves as more varied and fractured creatures, for whom crying was a natural expression of vulnerability and subjectivity.

This material suggests that, in 1950, cinematic taste was rigorously divided according to gender. A similar division had already existed in the film audiences of the 1930s and 1940s, but at that time costume film was a key arbiter of taste.⁷ By 1950 the situation had changed. Male respondents seem to have developed an increased sense of the gender divide, and they sought to propose a broad separation of male from female taste. Time and again, men from a range of occupations strove to distinguish their responses from those of women:

I do not cry as a woman does. But my feelings have been aroused by chiefly biographical films where the characters have been strongly drawn and the motif is 'achievement'. (Journalist, 32)

I cannot remember having cried in a film . . . I have been educated to regard it as rather effeminate. (Research economist, 36)

That was the sort of picture where the womenfolk say 'Eh, it was a luvly picture – aa wept buckets'. (Minister of religion)

Some men solved the embarrassment of intense emotionalism by their initial choice of film. Many replies echoed that of one town planner

7 Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 56–63, 136–46.

who asserted that, 'I never cry in the pictures because I don't go to pictures that tend to make me cry'. Numerous male respondents despised the Hollywood product – and indeed melodrama in general – because it might evoke inappropriately intense feelings. They made strenuous efforts to distance themselves from their own emotions, fearing that an uninhibited response to a weepie would 'unman' them in their own eyes, as well as those of others. The predominant sensation expressed by men was one of suspicion towards the mass culture industry. Two examples will suffice:

I despise films in general, and feel I should be proof against the wiles of producers, directors, and stars. (Teacher, 36)

To me, crying should be a genuine, almost sacred, expression of grief, and not at the beck-and-call of every second-rate artist who is unable to excite the interests of the audience in any other way . . . when I cry, I feel like a cow licking a dummy calf, or the hen sitting on dummy eggs. (Draughtsman, 24)

The replies of these men frequently coincided with a preference for 'realist', or at the very least, 'quality' films. They could thus display their broader cultural competence and perhaps distinguish themselves from others with lowbrow and low-status tastes. When gender-based preferences coincided with those premised on class-specific considerations, an unusually aggressive and unambiguous position could result. For example, a fifty-six-year-old grocer asserted that:

One ought not to be caught by the same old cheap tricks especially when one reflects that they are created by some bald-headed old coot chewing a sopping cigar and saying 'cut', 'retake', 'cut', 'retake', ad infinitum with about as much real feeling in his make-up as a boiled codfish.

For many men, their fear of the emotional blandishments of mass cinema led to a radical split between the analytical and the emotional sides of their personalities. Most of their replies expressed an extreme detachment while watching films. Often, they consciously lowered their emotional temperature by two means: either by imagining how they appeared when watching the screen, or by forcefully recalling the artificiality, rather than the intensity, of the cinematic experience. Thus, the men frequently converted a (seemingly laudable) awareness of the minutiae of a film's construction into an alibi for chronic detachment:

If I find myself becoming emotionally upset I kill it by thinking 'it's just a play'. Admittedly one loses much by this attitude but it's better than making an exhibition of one's emotions. (Teacher, 38)

If a poor man is shot and leaves a wife and family I know very well that blanks were used and that he'll immediately get up again!! The

same with a woman sobbing her heart out, her tears are probably glycerine anyway. (Inspector of weights and measures, 53)

Yes, strangely enough I do occasionally drop a tear in the pictures. When I realise it of course I stop . . . it is always towards the end (this is no doubt clever cutting on behalf of the producer). I shall watch out in future. (Customs officer, 30)

This 'distancing' phenomenon is entirely absent from the female replies. Women were much more lightly tuned emotionally than the men; they cried more readily, were rarely ashamed of it and were forthcoming on the nature of the emotional release conferred by the cinema. Women judged films according to the intensity of their involvement. They gave little attention to the minutiae of the films' technical virtuosity. Instead, women of every age and class group emphasized, and indeed celebrated, their own identification with events on the screen:

The first film I ever saw had me in howls and I've never stopped since. Ashamed? No, good heavens. (Artist, 26)

I never feel ashamed, and get mad when husband reminds me 'it's only a story' and so on. I marvel that people can go through dry-eyed. But I don't consider the film satisfying if I haven't had a good cry. (Housewife, 48)

Women respondents were well aware of the disdain in which their crying was held by men. For some, the emotional frigidity of their male companion could conflict with their own feelings:

In *Smiling Through* I cried enough to wet my face and coat collar. I cried in *Broken Blossoms*, with the little cripple child and the woman loving him so. My husband was with me, and I didn't dare cry very much. In *Ben-Hur*, when Ben-Hur finds his mother and sisters are lepers I cried very much. I was very young and enjoyed my tears a good deal. In my youth I enjoyed anything which gave me great emotional upheaval. It was a safety valve which I could let loose and enjoy. (Housewife, 38)

I remember years ago seeing Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino in *High Sierra* and being greatly upset. My husband pointed out to me that I should be seeing Bogart next week, since he was also in the coming attractions, but I could not be consoled. (Secretary, 39)

But for other women, a man's emotional response to a film was an important litmus test of his suitability as a future partner:

I don't go unless I think it is going to be a crying sort of film . . . I went once with a man I knew, he laughed about it, and I knew right away I wouldn't be seeing him any more. (Housewife, 24)

The women also appeared to be affected by the feelings of others in the audience. Men who found themselves on the verge of tears reported their sense of isolation from others in the audience. But women appeared to be acutely aware of the responses of other people, and to some extent were prompted by the emotions of other women. They frequently noticed the behaviour of other females in the cinema and modulated their own responses accordingly:

seeing a film with a sensitive and affinitive type of friend, the emotion I feel is intensely enhanced. (Secretary, 40)

Thus, men and women had fundamentally different attitudes to crying in the cinema, and these attitudes influenced their behaviour. In addition, they cried over different things.

The Mass-Observation replies can be divided into two distinct but related categories. Sometimes respondents indicated the subject matter which made them weep in general terms. On other occasions, they would cite specific films, or film moments. About a quarter of the women cited certain topics which would move them to tears. For the most part they cried at scenes which showed partings, unhappy children or cruelty to animals. Others included death scenes and films about refugees in their list of tear-inducing topics.

Not surprisingly, far fewer men were prepared to cite topics which could bring a tear to their eyes. Only eight per cent were able to cite general topics, as opposed to specific film moments, which might make them weep in the cinema. But patriotism, self-sacrifice and heroism could bring tears to those in their twenties and thirties. For a twenty-three-year-old student,

Brave but useless actions probably affect me most and the sight of real bravery in others sometimes brings a tear to my throat.

While the trigger for the tears of a thirty-six-year-old teacher was

emotional moments involving strong loyalty and love, and idealistic flights of moral and physical heroism.

For some older male respondents, any recognition of the little man seemed to be almost as strong a trigger as heroism. A thirty-four-year-old mortgage clerk claimed that 'a person making a speech on receiving a leaving present would move me very much, not only on the screen but in real life'; while a thirty-seven-year-old civil servant revealed that he had often wanted to cry in historical films which showed

the honouring or recognition of some humble person by the assembled heads of state, occasionally a triumphant return from great exploit [or] to see some odd character unselfishly rejoicing and performing little actions.

But it was the tragedies and the great events of the real world which brought a tear to the eyes of other men. Newsreels and documentaries were mentioned by a number of them as the types of film which moved them most.

I am only affected by the newsreel shots of the repatriation of the badly injured men of both sides while the war was being fought. Probably the shots of the reception arrangements and the waiting volunteers. The concentration camp pictures had not quite the same stirring effects for the human body deformed and shattered evokes far more sympathy while the sufferer is alive than dead. (Teacher, 24)

In fact, now I come to think of it, many of the most moving things in all my film-going – and I mean moving almost to the point of tears – are in documentary film – not Hollywood tear jerkers. (Journalist, 33)

War films often had the edge over any others: one respondent noted that,

any war film can 'get me that way', however detached I like to feel, and yet I know that if I were engaged in the scenes themselves, no such feeling would occur to me. (Unspecified occupation and age)

But it was only war films of a certain type. The ones most frequently mentioned as emotionally raw are *They Were Not Divided* (Terence Young, 1951), *The Hasty Heart* (Vincent Sherman, 1949) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946). The aspects selected for comment were not comradeship and communal experience, but those involving loneliness and alienation. There was therefore a clear contrast in the categories of subject matter which moved men and women. Almost without exception, those women who admitted to crying placed vulnerable children, and often animals, at or near the top of their lists. It was film scenes of childhood desolation which elicited the most unambiguous responses from female viewers, whereas for men it was the tragedies of war. Men preferred documentaries, newsreels or explicitly realist films because they most clearly eschewed the excesses of the 'weepie' genre. The women, however, defined as 'realist' those films which produced tears because they contained events similar to those in their own lives, or which accorded with their own emotional tenor. For them, the most intense emotions were produced by films which most clearly replicated their own family situations, and which thus exemplified a fidelity to their own emotions, as in the following example from one sixty-three-year-old housewife:

Escape Me Never produced great shuddering gulps which I could only control by keeping as still as possible, when Bergner finds that her baby has died. I did not feel ashamed at all, because a few years

previously I had myself passed through exactly the same bitter experience. I had thought that the unhappy memory was well and truly lived down. The scene on the film brought it to life again. I consider that in most cases of weeping at films it may be because the viewer identifies herself with the incident depicted. Not necessarily weeping in sympathy with the sorrows of the characters portrayed.

Interestingly, this writer clearly defined the responsive viewer as invariably feminine. For her, the film functioned as a sort of memory flashpoint: a poignant means of focusing and recalling key events in her life. A fifty-three-year-old writer cross-correlates her own family past with selected images from a film:

I had a tragic time with my mother whose mind went and I looked after her for years. In *Farrébique*, you saw the Grandpère dying and the priest clumping through the slush and snow to administer the last rites and the little boy in hobnailed boots swinging the censer in front of him. You saw the old man in bed and the light centred on his gnarled old hands knotted and cracked with years of hard work – his hands made me cry. They were so pathetic and symbolic of so many old people's hands; so many belonging to lonely old people with no home to die in, no-one near to love them.

Nothing matches this intensity and type of recall in all the male replies.

The list of films which had a strong effect on the Mass-Observation respondents are sometimes unexpected. *Scott of the Antarctic* (Charles Frend, 1948) was more frequently mentioned by women, whereas *Mrs Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) was more moving for male respondents. Art-house films, such as *Bicycle Thieves/Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, Italy, 1948) and *Hamlet* (Laurence Olivier, 1948) were equally tear-inducing for respondents of both sexes. *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), the film cited most often, moved almost twice as many women as men. *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950) was equally moving for both men and women, as was *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948).

In the men's film preferences, the concept of reserve was of paramount importance. They sought out, and were often moved by, films which were diffident about the emotions:

One cries more at the parts where the hero or heroine is putting on a brave show and is obviously bracing against emotion. (Civil servant, 34)

I was more moved by the mother [in *The Cure for Love*] who scarcely glances over her shoulder when her son comes in and,

although desperately glad to have him home safe, just says, 'how do, son'. (Surveyor, 25)

During the wartime and postwar periods, Ealing Film Studios played on this quality of reserve, and two of their postwar productions, (*Scott of the Antarctic* and *The Blue Lamp*) were extensively cited by Mass-Observation's respondents. In both films, the studio sought to heighten emotional tension by portraying the stoicism of their principal characters at times of stress. But the responses of men and women to *Scott of the Antarctic* were different from each other. Men seemed to weep at moments of reserve, whereas women wept at moments of parting and loss. One, a widowed forty-year-old social worker, wept 'when Scott said goodbye to his wife'. She continued, 'it was a tragic moment and real'. A thirty-five-year-old graduate housewife who cried during *Scott* also had to be able to relate to the situation on the screen. She noted that 'sad parts of films must have a relation to my own life'. Since *Scott* was almost exclusively preoccupied with definitions of masculinity, women had to respond to it in a selective way. For most of them, the departure of Scott from his wife was almost the only situation in the film to which they could relate. Another moment was the shooting of the ponies. A female farmer recalled:

I cried quite outright when the ponies had to be shot in *Scott of the Antarctic*, when really one ought to have felt furious at the inefficiency that made that necessary.

The responses to the film by men were of quite a different order. They were both generalized and unspecific.

The last picture I saw was *Scott of the Antarctic* which moved me very much. . . . I felt no shame, only that the picture was a good one. It must have been to move my emotions. (Insurance agent, 55)

Probably the feeling of loneliness, the realisation that in the last resort we each live our lives in isolation and can never be fully understood, seems the most expressive of sadness on such occasions. (Civil servant, 34)

There were similar differences in the responses of men and women to *The Blue Lamp*, a film about the community of a small London police station. Half-way through the film, the principal character, PC George Dixon (Jack Warner), is shot. Later, the police – and thus the audience – are told by means of a telephone call that he has died. In the scene which follows, the young recruit PC Mitchell (Jimmy Hanley), who had become a surrogate son for Dixon, is deputed to tell Mrs Dixon (Gladys Henson) of her husband's death. In the crucial scene, PC Mitchell is too stunned to tell her. Instead, she infers it from his demeanour and from the presence of a senior officer. Her immediate response is to displace grief into activity by moving

towards the sideboard in order to put into a vase the flowers which she has just brought in from the garden.

Although the death of George Dixon is unquestionably the central pivot of the film's dramatic structure, the point at which the women wept was different from that which brought tears to the eyes of the two men. One housewife cried 'when the policeman was shot'. But the men did not cry until later on, when they knew that he was dead. A forty-six-year-old accountant 'gulped when Jack Warner died in *The Blue Lamp* – or rather when his death was implicitly assumed over the phone'. Another, a thirty-year-old private secretary, remembered his response thus:

One recent film was *The Blue Lamp*, when PC Dixon died and his wife was getting some of his favourite flowers ready to take to him in hospital, and as she was doing this, the young policeman lodger PC Mitchell (played by Jimmy Hanley) came in to tell her that her husband was dead and then as PC Mitchell was the same age as her own son would have been, had he not been killed in the war, she turned to him and began to weep.

A similar difference between the responses of men and women can be discerned in the comments about *Johnny Belinda*, a popular Warner Brothers weepie. The plot deals with a deaf-mute girl, Belinda (Jane Wyman) who, after being raped, gives birth to a son Johnny. Unlike the two Ealing films, *Johnny Belinda* was an aggressive tear-jerker which pulled out all the emotional stops. The film was cited by eight respondents, five men and three women. The latter all identified with the heroine:

I cried in *Johnny Belinda* when the young couple came to take the mute's baby away, and also when she got it back again. . . . In *Johnny Belinda* practically all the women in the cinema must have been crying and the emotion seemed completely natural. (Housewife, 34)

I wept at *Johnny Belinda* [which was] about a dumb girl unable to cry for help. The look in that poor girl's face made my emotions bubble over. (Typist)

The men's responses were not so precisely focused on the emotions of the protagonist:

The occasions when I cry in the cinema are exceedingly rare. The last time I can recall was *Johnny Belinda* but I cannot recall which part of the film. I think I was a little ashamed of the fact, but I think I was with the majority of people in shedding a tear. (Schoolteacher, 26)

I have never cried at the pictures but almost done so on a number of occasions. I usually cure myself by saying 'it's only a film'. The

Johnny Belinda (Warner Bros):
 'The last time I was moved
 greatly was . . . the saying of
 the Lord's Prayer in dumb
 language'. Methodist minister,
 27. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills.



last time I was moved greatly was *Johnny Belinda* and the scene was the saying of the Lord's Prayer in dumb language. I know this moved many of my friends also. (Methodist minister, 27)

So men and women responded to *Johnny Belinda*, *Scott* and *The Blue Lamp* in significantly different ways. The films bore no fixed messages for their audiences; or rather, many respondents chose to ignore the explicit intentions of those who made the films or marketed them. Frequently the men replying to the Mass-Observation directive co-opted films into particular mind-sets of their own. They rewrote the films, as it were, for their own purposes. The interpretations of one thirty-year-old private secretary are interesting in this regard. He read *The Blue Lamp* (in particular the death of Dixon) as bearing the following message:

I felt that if such dramatic portrayal could be made to touch the hearts and minds of the people who are the cause of it, then we should have understanding, from which happy state of affairs we should find that the country could be a better place to live in.

In short, men looked for emotional reserve, and they tended to rewrite films to reinforce their own social views. The women's replies were of a radically different order. They often misremembered a film in such a way as to *heighten* its emotional profile. In recalling *Jane Eyre* (Robert Stevenson, 1943), one woman consigned Mr Rochester to an excessively Byronic role, and another rewrote the ending of *The Garden of Allah* (Richard Boleslawski, 1936) to make it even more tragic. The following misremembrance of *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (Arthur Crabtree, 1944) is interesting:

I was very affected. It is the one film which I can remember clearly, that made me cry more than any other. At the very end, when the heroine realized her dual-personality as she was dying – I was suffering too. And when she died and the husband of one side of her life and her lover of another, stood together, and placed, respectively a crucifix and a wild rose on her breast, I'm afraid I wept unashamedly. (Civil servant, 23)

What is significant is that the writer dramatized and intensified the original scene; she also rendered it more permissive. In the original film, the lover and the husband are crucially separated. The besuited husband is indoors, ratified and speaking aloud; the lover, in carnival costume, is excluded from the home in that he stands outside the window. He speaks *sotto voce*, and throws, rather than places, the symbolic rose onto her breast. This woman restructured the film in such a way as to draw the moral boundaries less strictly, and to throw onto the film a more providential gloss.

We can conclude that female memories of individual films differed substantially from those of the men in important ways. The men's pattern of intense response was predicated on quite a narrow spectrum of emotions, while the women displayed a broader range of social sympathy. The gendered attitudes that men and women brought to individual films shaped their responses as much as did the films themselves.

Can such clear boundaries be ascertained when the responses are analysed by social class? A useful contemporary correlation of occupation and income broke down 1950s society into five social groups.⁸ Group A, the well-to-do, constituted 3.75 per cent of the population. Group B, the middle class, formed 7.75 per cent of the whole, and Group C, the lower middle class, accounted for 17 per cent. The majority, the working class or Group D, accounted for 63 per cent and Group E, the poor, was 8.5 per cent. The Mass-Observation sample was drawn from a very narrow social base. There were no replies at all from social group E, and too few from A to draw any firm conclusions. Responses from the D group are also difficult to assess, due to the paucity of numbers. All that can be said about them with any certainty is that a substantial proportion showed considerable resistance to crying. The Mass-Observation material can therefore only be of vital use in contrasting the tastes of social groups B and C, and those who straddle the two.

Group C respondents were lower middle class; they belonged to the administrative and lower management grades. In the twentieth century, this has traditionally been characterized as an upwardly mobile group, which is prey to social anxieties and a sense of its own marginality *vis-à-vis* the institutions of power. The film tastes of both sexes in this

⁸ Hulton Press, *Hulton Readership Survey* (London: Hulton Press, 1952).

social class evince extreme unease at the possibility that they might be manipulated. If they felt uncomfortably aware that the film (or its progenitors) were exerting undue control over them, then their wariness took precedence over their aesthetic judgement. Nonetheless, lower-middle-class respondents did cry, and to a particular pattern. They foregrounded family relationships in an intense way in their accounts of films. One woman, a nursery nurse, aged sixty-five, remembered an unnamed film,

in which a little French girl was sent to Switzerland. It was full of scenes that brought tears to my eyes; the parting from her mother and the misery and poverty of her home in France and later the child's inability to express what she felt. Sometimes I think my feelings are too near the surface – too easily roused.

What characterized lower-middle-class respondents was that such feelings crossed the gender divide. We noted earlier that films containing children invariably moved women from every group; but a significant proportion of lower-middle-class men also mentioned children (and animals) as prompting tears. They were the only male group to do this, and they also emphasized that films foregrounding family relationships move them intensely:

The only specific occasion I can remember was when I saw *Dear Octopus*. That took place towards the end of my 3-year term abroad when family gatherings were occupying no small space in one's day to day thoughts. (Male insurance clerk, 42)

Morning Departure (Roy Baker, 1950) was almost exclusively mentioned by lower-middle-class respondents, as was *The Best Years of Our Lives*. In this,

the character with the hooks played the part so well and indeed the whole film portrayed post-war life so well that many people experienced emotional upsets. I will always remember it was one of the best films about life that was ever made. (Male clerk, 26)

Interestingly this respondent, like many others, co-opted the favoured film into his own view about the postwar situation, effectively rewriting it *en route* as unproblematically 'realist'. As we shall see, this is directly comparable with the work done on *Brief Encounter* and *Bicycle Thieves* by middle-class respondents.

The two groups which fell uneasily between the middle and the lower middle class were the students and the civil servants. In general, students displayed emotional volatility and a high level of articulacy, but their replies were too varied to permit us to see any clear pattern. Those of the civil servants were more conclusive. They displayed far more reluctance to cry than other respondents from the middle classes. A typical reply was this from a twenty-eight-year-old:

I fail to show much emotion about anything. Some films have made me experience a tense feeling of pity but they have really affected me so little that I cannot call a specific instance to mind.

Finally, the middle-class respondents, the most significant group in this survey, showed marked differences from the students, the civil servants and those in the lower middle class. Both men and women wept at a range of films. Only a relatively small percentage never cried at all, certainly a much smaller proportion than those in the lower middle class. But what comes through in the replies from middle-class respondents is a continuing concern that their tears should not be wasted on inferior films. Many women of this group highlighted the tension between their responses to sentimental films which they despised, and their considered judgement of a film's quality:

Alas the sloppiest shoddiest sentiment is the kind that makes me want to cry the most . . . I haven't cried lately, perhaps because I have only gone to some rather good films. (Farmer, female)

I do cry and usually over the stupidest films which I know quite well are rubbish. Films like *Pinkie* make me feel quite miserable. (Civil servant, female, 25)

I cry usually at the more tripey films, especially films with children who lose their parents and get lost. (Immunological researcher, female, 47)

Many men in this group took the opposite approach to the women. They justified their tears by claiming a very high artistic quality for the film itself. Some accounted for their lack of tears by arguing that cinema culture had undergone an irrevocable decline. It seems that for many middle-class respondents, the high point of British and American cinema had passed:

I believe that *Goodbye Mr. Chips* would also arouse in me the deepest emotions as it did on each of the five times I saw it. But pictures like these are not produced nowadays. (Accountant, 34)

I used to cry sometimes, but as I get older the films are not so well done. (Architect, 36)

Others, both men and women, argued that a quality film culture could still be redeemed. For some, quality stemmed from the literary origin of a film:

The pictures which usually affect me are those adapted from well-known novels. (eg. *Great Expectations*, *Wuthering Heights*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, etc.) (Accountant, 37)

But for others, it was the art of filmmaking itself that was the crucial element in generating an emotional response:

I naturally as a man feel it's a sign of weakness to weep at a film – but then I do also declare that it's proof of skilful direction that film can be genuinely moving to me. I think it may well be this quality of being truly moving that makes the difference between being a technically very competent or complex film (I'm thinking of *Citizen Kane*) and a *great* film. (Journalist, 33)

Middle-class respondents also expressed a sense of unease with films produced for a mass audience; they felt sullied by the intense emotions evoked by 'cheap' films. Significantly, a very large number allayed their guilt problems about the pleasures of mass cinema by foregrounding those of the art-house film. Whatever the artistic merits of the foreign product, middle-class respondents were clearly using it as a means of laundering or purifying suspect pleasures. They could allow themselves the luxury of weeping at art-house movies because the status conferred by their consumption obviated any sense of guilt. They bracketed together as *respectable* 'weepies' films such as *Le Jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939), *Les Enfants du paradis* (Marcel Carné, 1944), *Farrébique* (Georges Rouquier, 1946), and *Monsieur Vincent* (Maurice Cloche, 1947). One woman noted that:

I used to cry at some of the old Russian and French films. These provided legitimate opportunities for strong emotion, so I wasn't at all ashamed of it, but felt the film was doing a good job. (Writer, 52)

Writing of *Un Carnet de Bal* (Julien Duvivier, 1947), another reported that:

I have seen this film five times . . . it is the most wonderful film ever made. The effect it produces on me is wrought by a combination of beautiful settings, superb acting and a moral that an adult can approve. (Civil servant, 47)

Bicycle Thieves was the film mentioned by far the most frequently in this category. Time and again middle-class respondents described the end of the film as providing heart-wrenching sensations which were morally unimpeachable. The film's appeal seemed to be spread equally between men and women:

I cried in *Bicycle Thieves* when the child's idealisation of the father was visibly shaken. (Male research worker, 26)

I cried in *Bicycle Thieves* when the small boy and the father were convulsively clutching hands and were unable to speak after the release of the father who had just made such a desperate attempt to steal the bicycle. (Female teacher, 35)

There remains the extraordinary case of *Brief Encounter*. This film did not appear in the list of box-office successes in the year of its release, 1945, though it gained considerable critical acclaim. It appears

Bicycle Thieves (PDS/ENIC):
the most frequently mentioned
respectable weepie. Picture
courtesy: BFI Stills.



with great regularity in the 'crying lists' of the Mass-Observation survey, but exclusively in the responses of the middle class, whose members bracketed it together with foreign art-house movies. None of those who responded so emotionally to *Brief Encounter* interpreted it as a repressive or morally conservative film. On the contrary, a thirty-five-year-old female teacher cried 'when the heroine was recapitulating in her mind her late love affair and her husband was watching her with such pain and sympathy'. Middle-class respondents also found *Brief Encounter* moving for reasons which had as much to do with its social ambience as its sexual morality. For example,

It was closest to real (middle class) life than any other film yet made. (Male journalist, 33)

Brief Encounter and *Bicycle Thieves* were the two films which commanded by far the strongest responses among Mass-Observation's middle-class respondents. But it was not just the films' subject matter or their social ambience that brought tears to their eyes. Music played a key role in this group's response to both films. A forty-year-old widow observed that 'I notice great music affects my tear ducts . . . music is the greatest factor. (e.g. *Brief Encounter* is the strongest example of music evoking intense emotion.)' While the principal of a firm of tutors accounted thus for her tears during the same film: 'the music was responsible for a good deal here. I would have wept without it, but with that and the story to contend with, there was no hope.' There were similar comments about *Bicycle Thieves*. A forty-year-old woman from this group luxuriated in the emotional impact of the soundtrack. She recalled, 'I wept through *Bicycle Thieves*, the music was so wonderful, minor key, it made me feel the hopelessness of it all'.

Brief Encounter (Cineguild/Rank): 'When the heroine was recapitulating in her mind her love affair ...'. Female teacher, 35. Picture courtesy: The Rank Organisation plc, and BFI Stills.



As we noted earlier, Mass-Observation's question about music had preceded the one about crying in the cinema, and so respondents were already alert to the issue. But it looks as though only middle-class respondents wished to (or were able to) articulate their feelings about the emotional triggers of the music. Another interpretation is possible, however; the Rachmaninov score of *Brief Encounter* and the quasi-classical music of *Bicycle Thieves* permitted middle-class respondents to address the intense feelings prompted by music, but in an intellectually respectable context which conferred some status.

So only middle-class respondents were extensively concerned with questions of artistic quality, with the literary origins of a film, or with the emotional impact of the music. Neither the men nor the women in the lower middle class refer to art-house films. Nor do they appear to be in the business of using film as an index of their cultural status. Only middle-class respondents were concerned with the artistic standing of film texts; only they considered the consonance between a film's quality and their own cultural capital. On the other hand, the lower middle class appeared to be roused by exclusively domestic issues in films – threats to children, animals or family unity.

There were age differences too, as well as those of gender and class. There was a general propensity for younger respondents of both sexes to be more prone to tears, and for older people to be more stoical. But from an analysis of the replies of respondents of different age groups, it appears that there had also been a significant change in audience

responses due to the war. This appears to have affected men more profoundly than women.

The Mass-Observation respondents varied in age from nineteen to seventy-nine, but most of them were between twenty and forty. Of those in this age bracket, both male and female respondents cited approximately 110 different films which made them cry. Most of these were produced in the 1930s and 1940s. At first sight, the responses of men and women seem similar. But more distinct differences emerge from a closer analysis of the replies of each age group.

The percentage of prewar films cited by both sexes rose steadily with age. This is to be expected, since respondents in their thirties would probably have seen more prewar films than those who were younger. One of the most moving prewar films recalled by older respondents of both sexes was *Cavalcade* (Frank Lloyd, 1932), which had been produced eighteen years earlier. It had obviously made a lasting impression on many older viewers. A forty-year-old farmer's wife replied:

I remember vividly my husband and myself seeing the film of *Cavalcade*. We both wept unashamedly and looked awful when we came out. I think it was a mirror of one's own life. Not that the story was the same but it covered all the period of our two lives, we shared all the same reactions.

But this broad correlation between male and female response starts to break down for films made during and after the war. Unsurprisingly, women in the thirty-six to forty age group recalled three times as many film titles that had made them weep as did the men. But what is surprising is that the position was reversed for younger respondents. Men aged thirty-one to thirty-five cited as many, or slightly more, films than women, while those in the twenty-six to thirty age group cited twice as many. In the twenty to twenty-five age group male respondents cited nearly twice as many postwar films as the women. This discrepancy may be partly explained by the higher number of men in the Mass-Observation sample, but this imbalance does not justify the changes between each age group. The number of postwar films cited by younger men, and the higher number of films cited by the older female respondents, means that the younger men in this sample (those who grew to maturity – and probably fought – during the war years) seemed to weep more easily than those who were older. It seems likely, therefore, that their wartime experiences made them more prone to weeping.

Evidence to support this hypothesis comes from an analysis of the responses to *Mrs. Miniver*, the wartime film which was cited most often by Mass-Observation's respondents. Those citing it were mainly middle-class males, who were of an age to have fought in the war. This film was primarily made to increase sympathy among the US people for Britain's struggle against Nazi Germany.⁹ It was first

⁹ Sidney Bernstein, *The Film and International Relations* (London: Workers Film Association, 1945), pp. 5–6.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 220.

released in Britain in 1942. At that time it was the top box-office attraction and the fourth most favourite film among Mass-Observation's panel of respondents, attracting twice as many votes from women as from men.¹⁰ The 1942 responses had indicated that many women identified with the heroine, Greer Garson, and were not alienated by the idealized version of the war produced by MGM.

Eight years later things had changed. The balance of gender response had altered dramatically. In 1950, four times as many men as women remembered *Mrs. Miniver* as a film which brought tears to their eyes. Many male respondents were still able to recall the tensions between mental disdain and affective response which this film had engendered in them.

An emotionally supercharged film . . . will make me cry all the way through, but most of all at the end. So did *Mrs. Miniver*, although I didn't even think it was well done. (publisher, 38)

Before the war, I don't think I ever cried. The first time I cried in a film was at the death of Teresa Wright in *Mrs. Miniver* . . . I must add that neither *Mrs. Miniver* nor *Gone With the Wind* are the kind of film I most admire. (estate agent, 39)

The last comment provides a clue as to the impact that the war had begun to have on the traditional reserve and *sang-froid* of the mature British middle-class male. A thirty-two-year-old teacher noted,

The war has apparently made me far more emotional, because I find my eyes become wet in the pictures very easily. I don't feel ashamed, but the war has made me much more emotional, that's all.

This was echoed by a thirty-six-year-old journalist:

Only since the war have I ever felt moved towards tears by a film. Why, I don't know. Since I am interested in art of all kinds, only rarely am I unconscious of watching a film, ie. losing myself in a story.

The war had clearly forced open a space between the ordinariness of everyday domestic life and the violent and unpredictable events in the world beyond. By exploiting this tension, a talented filmmaker like William Wyler could bring tears to men's eyes. Many could be made to weep at the point where the tensions in the narrative of a film were resolved, so the traditional happy ending of the Hollywood film now had more social significance for these respondents than hitherto. A twenty-eight-year-old publisher noted:

I frequently cry at the pictures (never at the theatre, oddly enough). I'm a real sucker and almost any picture will make me cry, provided it has some sentimental or emotional episode. A happy ending (however corny and however stupid) will make me want to cry.

The tension between the naturalist mode of representation and the emotional structure of the weepie could also open up the rational and affective responses of the younger members of the audience just as much as those of the old. A thirty-six-year-old schoolmaster recalled his responses, and those of a party of boys from his school, when they went to see *They Were Not Divided*, which was not produced until 1950..

I seldom go to the pictures and even less do I cry, but I am sometimes moved to a point near tears. Traditional British training keeps me from giving way to this feeling. The only specific occasion I can remember is the end of *They Were Not Divided*, but any similar incident would have the same effect especially if it involved children, i.e. any event which could really happen and is not merely Hollywood sob-stuff and which in real life would probably reduce the sufferers to tears will, if well acted, move me deeply. I am ashamed of this trait because so many films have overdone the sob stuff and cheapened this play on the emotions and I feel I should be above this. When I saw *They Were Not Divided*, I was in charge of a party of boys from my school. They are all delinquent and many of them like to feel they are 'tough,' but as the lights went up quite half of them were blinking hard or surreptitiously wiping their eyes. I tried to avoid showing I was moved and not one of the boys but tried to hide it too. No-one commented on the film until we were clear of the cinema and had regained complete control. Then though all said it was a 'sad' picture, I did not hear any admit to feeling greatly moved and I did not do so myself.

It would seem that the emotional privations and disturbances which took place during the war made both men and women more liable to weep in the cinema. But the impact on the traditionally reticent males was more noticeable than that on women, who in any case tended to be far less reserved.

The Mass-Observation survey makes it clear that we need to distinguish between different responses when we talk about emotional and psychological reactions to films. Men and women clearly differed in the topics which made them cry. Time and again, women reported that scenes of children, animals or loss would prompt them to tears. But men were moved by 'realism' and scenes of patriotism and self-sacrifice. While the women welcomed the emotional involvement offered by weepies, the men resisted it and attempted to distance themselves by concentrating on the techniques of filmmaking. Men and women sought films out for different reasons, and experienced varying gratifications from them. Even though the disruptions of the war had released men's hitherto repressed propensity to weep in the

11 Dallas W. Smythe, Parker B. Lusk and Charles A. Lewis, 'Portrait of an art-theater audience', *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, vol. VIII (Fall 1953), pp. 28–50; Dallas W. Smythe, John R. Gregory, Alvin Ostrin, Oliver P. Colvin and William Moroney, 'Portrait of a first-run audience', *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1955), pp. 390–409; Kenneth P. Adler, 'Art films and eggheads', *Studies in Public Communication* (Summer 1959), pp. 7–15.

cinema, and had vigorously stimulated their powers of film recall, women's 'film memories' were constituted quite differently, and had not been subject to the same processes of emotional repression.

Class fractions were sharply divided in their responses to film. The lower middle class, habitually preoccupied by matters of status, was most acutely moved by films, albeit American, which presented a world in which the hard-won securities of home and family might be under threat. The established middle class, on the other hand, was increasingly and intensely anti-American; their rejection of US popular culture simultaneously fuelled their hatred of Hollywood and their espousal of the notion of a European art-house 'quality film'. It is clear that it was the consonance between the artistic status of *Brief Encounter* and *Bicycle Thieves* and the cultural capital of middle-class respondents which made the films so moving for them.

To our knowledge, there was no film survey undertaken in the period which is as rich or detailed. Those which were carried out in the 1950s and 1960s on art-house audiences were all US-based, and the conclusions which they drew on class differences in matters of taste are not relevant for analysts of British audiences.¹¹ Although it is unbalanced from a socioeconomic perspective, this Mass-Observation survey helps to fill in important gaps in knowledge about audience response in the 1940s and 1950s. It gives us detailed (though not unproblematic) access to the film memories of more than three hundred people. These memories are selective of course, and the discourses in which they are framed are structured by the period, as well as by the class, gender and personal history of the respondents. The most fascinating (and difficult) question that should be asked is about the relative strengths of these different determinants.

The Mass-Observation survey augments, but to some degree challenges, the crucial work of Jackie Stacey in *Star Gazing*. She bases her conclusions on 350 letters from exclusively female viewers, and she establishes coherent patterns of female spectatorship for the 1940s and 1950s. The 318 Mass-Observation letters, because of their gender mix, enable us to distinguish clearly between male and female response; the reports from male viewers suggest that the experiences which they obtained from film culture were radically different from those of women. Moreover, the Mass-Observation material is extremely precise about respondents' occupations, which makes it possible to extend analyses of gender difference into ones about class and class fractions. The exact age descriptions also allow us to draw conclusions about the differences between generations in matters of taste and emotional responsiveness.

At one level, our findings endorse Stacey's conclusions, and they flesh them out with additional information. However, Stacey argues that films and stars are centrally instrumental in shaping the responses of audiences, and it is on this point that our interpretation of the Mass-Observation material challenges her work. It seems to us that, in

the period under consideration, gender, social class and, to a lesser extent, age were paramount in determining the nature and intensity of film response. These constraints appear to have been more significant even than the nature of the filmic text in shaping responses to films. This applied to 'writerly' texts, which sought to achieve a strong emotional impact, as much as to more 'readerly' texts, which deliberately allowed the film viewer to adopt a range of identificatory positions. The responses to Warner's *Johnny Belinda* appear to have been clearly divided by gender, those to *Brief Encounter* and *Bicycle Thieves* by social class.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the limitations imposed on our findings by the survey method adopted by Mass-Observation. The personal information contained in each of the responses leads to a socioeconomic rather than a purely psychological classification, and the precise interpretation of the word 'crying' varied between individual respondents. Furthermore, there may well have been differences which were not captured in the respondents' replies, between what actually happened when they went to the cinema and what they remembered when they were asked in August 1950. Even so, from the Mass-Observation evidence, it looks as though the film text could not speak directly to the cinemagoer unless it could match his or her psychological disposition, like a tracing laid on top of a map. Rather, the film text was perceived through the powerful filters of gender, social class and age which underpinned the broader cultural formation of British cinema audiences during the postwar period.

Framing gay youth

BEN GOVE

Since their first publication in 1905, Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* have constituted perhaps the most influential discussion of child and adolescent sexuality in western culture. Much of the importance of the *Essays* lies in their insistence that, contrary to more conventional arguments, sexual desire emerges within the earliest years of life. Yet while Freud takes great care to stress the diversity of pre-adult sexuality, he often interprets that diversity through a normative adult-centred conceptual framework. In doing so, he (re)produces – both knowingly and unknowingly – a series of theoretical contradictions which may be seen to recur and multiply throughout a wide range of subsequent cultural framings of child and adolescent eroticism.

The second and third essays, on 'Infantile sexuality' and 'The transformations of puberty' respectively, seek to characterize and delineate the categories of child, pubertal and adult sexuality. The third essay opens with Freud's declaration that:

With the arrival of puberty, changes set in which are destined to give infantile sexual life its final, normal shape. The sexual instinct has hitherto been predominantly auto-erotic; it now finds a sexual object.¹

Soon afterwards, however, the theorist's introductory remarks adopt a more tentative tone:

The starting-point and the final aim of the process which I have described are clearly visible. The intermediate steps are still in many ways obscure to us. We shall have to leave more than one of them as an unsolved riddle.²

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 7 (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 127.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

3 Ibid., p. 164.

4 Ibid., p. 51.

5 Ibid., p. 109.

6 Ibid., p. 149.

7 Ibid., p. 156.

8 Ibid., p. 165.

9 Ibid., p. 152.

10 Ibid., p. 155.

11 Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 353. Although these lectures date from 1915–17, Freud also continued to update the *Three Essays* until 1924.

12 Freud, *Three Essays*, p. 153.

However, a brief glance at the surrounding argument will indicate that these ‘riddles’ of puberty (rather like the more infamous male psychoanalytic ‘riddles’ of female sexuality) are not mysteries, but instead products of Freud’s own mystifying pursuit of the ‘innate constitution’³ of each age-based category, even as he argues ‘that the choice between [what is] “innate” and “acquired” is not an exclusive one’.⁴ The more he tries to pin down the stages of sexual growth, the more their irreducible diversity, and their interconnections with those years surrounding them, become interpreted as enigmas and even ‘aberrations’ from ‘normal’ development.

Much of this incoherence is in fact acknowledged within the text. Thus, if puberty technically describes the period when a child’s ‘predominantly auto-erotic’ sexuality becomes more genitally focused and ‘now finds a sexual object’, then we are also reminded on several occasions that ‘infantile sexual life, in spite of the preponderating dominance of erotogenic zones, exhibits components which from the very first involve other people as sexual objects’.⁵ And although Freud argues, somewhat rigidly, that ‘the sexual life of maturing youth is almost entirely restricted to indulging in phantasies, that is, in ideas that are not destined to be carried into effect’,⁶ elsewhere he repeatedly challenges the notion that ‘the sexual manifestations not infrequently to be observed in children [are] irregularities’.⁷ Indeed, in his closing summary, Freud casts considerable doubt over his own, often constraining, categorization of sexual stages and behaviours throughout the *Essays*: ‘In theory one is always inclined to overestimate the [constitutional factors]; therapeutic practice emphasizes the importance of the [accidental factors]’.⁸

Yet despite this self-reflexive approach to his methodology, Freud’s hesitant focus on the ‘constitutional factors’ still causes him to lean towards a normative construction of adolescent sexuality. We are told that after the infantile period of polymorphous auto-erotic sexual discovery (which also commonly involves interpersonal desire), puberty somehow harnesses object-choice to ‘the task [of finding] its way to the opposite sex’.⁹ This presumptuously heterosexual ‘task’ is described as ‘one of [those] implicit in object-choice’, in a prioritizing manoeuvre which leads Freud to categorize straight reproductive sex as the ‘normal’ adult goal at the end of adolescence, and ‘to regard any established aberration from normal sexuality as an instance of developmental inhibition and infantilism’.¹⁰

Of course, Freud’s description of sexual ‘normality’ is generally intended as an account of normative cultural understandings of sexuality, rather than being prescriptive. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, for example, he warns against ‘the error of confusing sexuality and reproduction’.¹¹ Furthermore, in the *Essays*, attaining object-choice ‘in what is regarded as the normal direction’¹² is seen to be a clumsy process which depends precisely upon the uneven repression and disavowal of a multitude of sexual

13 Ibid., p. 86.

14 'Sexual Traffic', an interview with Judith Butler, in *differences*, vol. 6, nos. 2–3 (1994), p. 81.

15 Freud, *Three Essays*, p. 150.

16 Ibid., p. 160.

17 Ibid., p. 152.

18 Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 51.

'perversions' which predate 'normal' development, and which always remain 'a part of what passes as the normal constitution'.¹³

However, as so often in psychoanalysis, the self-reflexive use of normative terminology here bleeds into a more conventional deployment of those terms, serving in part to naturalize the marginalized cultural status of non-normative sexualities once again. Or as Gayle Ruben puts it: 'Freud was not all that interested in "perverts" or "inverts"; he seemed much more excited by neurosis and the psychic costs of sexual "normality"'.¹⁴ Hence, the Oedipal narrative of puberty focuses on the resurgence of infantile 'sexual impulses towards [one's] parents, *which are as a rule already differentiated owing to the attraction of the opposite sex*' (emphasis mine).¹⁵ And equally, while Freud traces all human sexuality back to an infantile polymorphous perversity, his positioning of reproductive heterosexuality (however tenuously) at the end of a 'long path of development' nevertheless constructs 'perverse' sexuality as 'a point of fixation' or regression on that path, always arrested *en route* to adulthood.¹⁶ The possibility that homosexual (or other marginalized) pre-adult desire might constitute an end in itself is side-tracked by the notion of an 'infantile' phase, which is said to take place either within or immediately following puberty: 'Often enough the first impulses after puberty go astray, though without any permanent harm resulting'.¹⁷ In short, as Freud charts the complexity of adolescent desire, he can often be seen to map a heterocentric adult perspective onto that acutely unpredictable pre-adult realm of sexuality.

As Alan Sinfield has summarized, 'coherence is always selection',¹⁸ and it is in those moments of seemingly tightest coherence in the *Three Essays* that the most exclusionary selection processes are taking place. Yet Freud's exclusionary coherences necessarily also borrow from a wider, overly deterministic, scientific construction of child and adolescent sexuality, which he both builds upon and repeatedly undermines. And in turn, the unstable heterosexual adult bias of this surrounding ideological framework has been reproduced and normalized across many post-Freudian constructions of pre-adult sexuality – and usually at the expense of Freud's unorthodox recognition of infantile eroticism and the precariousness of impossibly narrow sociosexual norms.

Hence, whereas the *Three Essays* allow for polymorphous desires before (and to some degree during) puberty, more normative adult discourses of child sexuality move between being convinced of children's unequivocal sexual innocence, and celebrating the 'innate' heterosexuality of childhood. This paradoxical belief that we are heterosexually innocent until proven homosexually guilty therefore rests on an uneven disavowal of pre-adolescent sexual desire, which causes child sexuality to return as a troubling spectre. Popular cinema is replete with such hauntings, whether in the recuperated form of young children being used to ventriloquize heterosexuality in *Look*

Who's Talking and *Look Who's Talking Too* (Amy Heckerling, 1989 and 1990), or more sensationally, as the unvoiced threat accompanying Rhoda Penmark's lethal greed and 'precocity' in *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956).

More generally, the 'decency' which is tentatively ascribed to pictures of naked children in family photo albums and other popular imagery depends upon an inherently ambiguous separation of children from an adult monopoly on sexual knowledge: hypocritically, these images would be considered 'obscene' if their subjects were adults or older youths. By the same token, the commonplace desexualization of childhood sits uncomfortably beside those 'cute' posed kisses between boy and girl also found in domestic snapshots, or used to sell products, which function simultaneously to reassure and validate the heterosexual adult viewer, and to instruct and reward acquiescence in the child viewer (and performer).

What these and other comparable images also represent, then, are the ways in which adult framings of pre-adult sexuality always involve an uneasy use of discursive power, for the adult show of interest immediately implicates the framer in what she/he frames. Yet in their attempts to make rigid the blurry distinction between child innocence and adult sexual knowledge, adult-oriented frameworks also place greater pressure on those adolescent years positioned ambiguously between the two, where childhood and adulthood continuously overlap. The insurmountably tricky question of when a 'child' becomes a 'youth' becomes a 'young adult' becomes a fully-fledged 'adult', is crudely answered with the riddling notion of puberty as a biologically enforced rite of passage from childhood erotic ambiguity into adult heterosexuality.¹⁹

In this respect, Freud's metaphor of the riddle in 'The transformations of puberty' is fitting in more ways than he senses. For the riddle is generally known as a popular verbal puzzle, a mystifying description which is 'so phrased that [information coded as] ingenuity is required for elucidation of the answer or meaning'.²⁰ The successful decoder is rewarded with a sense of community with others 'in the know'. The same is true of the riddling narrative of an adult-mediated journey through adolescence to sexual maturity, held up as a misted mirror to the youths it supposedly reflects. The most familiar presentation of this narrative is the 'facts of life' talk delivered, with more or less shame-faced avoidance of details, by a parent/adult to the equally embarrassed offspring/youth. Of course, few young people are likely to relate to, or take very seriously, such awkwardly distanced descriptions, but in a wider sense, throughout the confusingly transient years of adolescence, innumerable variations on the story of 'the birds and the bees' place considerable pressure on youths to internalize a riddling simplification of the vast experiential terrain of sexual development. Put simply, those who accept, and meet, the stringent terms of this particular riddle will receive the cultural validation

¹⁹ Despite the broad circumference of 'youth', I will be using the most common definition: no longer childhood, but under the mythologically adult age of twenty-one.

²⁰ Adapted from the primary definition of 'riddle' in Patrick Hanks (ed.), *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1979).

²¹ Although my focus is on gay and lesbian youths, clearly a great number of bisexual and heterosexual youths, especially girls and young women, are marginalized in different ways within this fantasized adult paradigm.

²² One gay teenager recalls: 'I really did think that I was the only young gay. That's what made me take the tablets, attempt suicide.' Quoted in Lorraine Trenchard and Hugh Warren, *Something to Tell You: the Experiences and Needs of Young Lesbians and Gay Men in London* (London Teenage Group, 1984), p. 145.

²³ Jane Mills, 'Classroom conundrums: sex education and censorship', in Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (eds), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 201.

of adult acknowledgment and, eventually, authenticated adult identity.

Those who are not accepted into the dominant adult fold, however, must decide whether to disguise their desires and experiences to match those of the master narrative; or to believe in the unimportance, even impossibility, of their own sexuality; or to brazen it out against a narrowly defined heterosexuality and, as a result, be consigned to the outskirts of adulthood by normative opinion, or else branded an eternal child (in the most disparagingly adult-centred sense of 'childishness'). These are the daunting options faced by gay and lesbian youths, whose emergent sexual longings and identities can only be comprehended as an almost apparitional 'phase', if at all, within the heterocentric rubric of puberty.²¹

Looked at from an adult gay or lesbian perspective, reactionary attempts to evaporate young homosexual desire can be seen to deny the equally formative significance of all types of adolescent sexual fantasy, as well as sexual activity. As with Freud, to some extent, in 'The transformations of puberty', what also gets denied here is that homophobic culture, not internal chemistry, works against the social realization of emergent same-sexual desires. Still, from the disempowered point of view of lesbian or gay youths, seeing through cultural denial requires extraordinary energy and self-confidence in a straight environment which continuously naturalizes its own sexual preferences and, for the greater part, punishes unapologetic homosexuality at any age. As suicide statistics routinely reiterate, gay and lesbian youths are particularly prone to incorporating the threats of erasure that are implicit in heterocentric cultural messages and explicit in homophobic assaults, and turning that violence against their own vulnerable sexualities.²²

Obviously, one of the central routes by which narrow heterocentric understandings of sexual development reach young people is through formal sex education. On the one hand, a marked absence of frank and non-deterministic sex education in British schools makes it even more vital that, in Jane Mills's words, 'most young people receive their sex education from the media, from women's magazines, from pornography and from their peer-group'.²³ On the other hand, most existing sex education is based on patriarchally weighted notions of heterosexual monogamy and wedlock, which not only disregard the immediate experiences of many straight youths, but also render lesbian, gay and bisexual desires in the young as momentary, or imaginary, foibles. One of the most tragic consequences of this silencing is that, on the whole, gay and lesbian teenagers, like others, remain dangerously unaware of the non-judgemental safer sex education which has been largely developed by their adult counterparts.

²⁴ See Anne Marie Smith, 'A symptomology of an authoritarian discourse: the parliamentary debates on the prohibition of the promotion of homosexuality', in *New Formations*, no. 10 (Spring 1990), pp. 41–65. Smith's exemplary article also provides a fuller analysis of the Clause supporters' cynically constructed rhetorical strategies.

²⁵ Quoted in Alan Travis, 'Section 28 "no bar to gay issues"', *The Guardian*, 26 July 1988.

²⁶ Mills, 'Classroom conundrums', p. 207.

The most determined attempt to silence pre-adult homosexuality in recent British history came in the form of Clause 28 of the 1987–8 Local Government Act. As is now well known, this fragment of legislation outlaws the intentional 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities, and goes on to prohibit those authorities from allowing 'the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Instigators of the Clause had backed their adult-centred arguments for the need to 'protect family values' by referring to pro-lesbian and gay education policies in some London boroughs; by making imaginary claims that gay-positive books had been made available to pupils and teachers in these boroughs; and by also citing adult-oriented policies and texts (including the 1971 Gay Liberation Front manifesto) as 'evidence' of an organized campaign to 'indoctrinate' pupils into homosexuality.²⁴ Following a vast national campaign run by lesbians, gays and their allies, Clause 28 nevertheless passed into British law on 9 March 1988, and came into effect as Section 28 two months later. But its supporters had not done their homework on the education system: despite the preoccupation with teaching material in the Clause, the control over sex education and curriculum policies was actually outside of the jurisdiction of local authorities, and therefore remained the property of school governors, as it had done since 1986.

However, the 1986 Education Act had already included demands that sex education in schools should concentrate on 'moral considerations and the value of family life',²⁵ while as Mills points out,

the [accompanying] Department of Education and Science circular states unequivocally: 'There is no place in any school in any circumstances for teaching which advocates homosexual behaviour, which presents it as the 'norm', or which encourages homosexual experimentation by pupils.'²⁶

As with Section 28, the direct enforcement of such rulings is a difficult procedure. Yet precisely because of this ambivalence, institutional anxiety levels had already run high prior to Section 28 over any forms of sex education which might be seen to condone sexual variety. The infamously vague guidelines of Section 28, and the anti-gay stance of subsequent sex education legislation, have only exacerbated cultural paranoia about the 'promotion', let alone the acknowledgement, of diverse adolescent sexualities.

Given this critical state of affairs, popular representations and debates hold an especially intense significance as informal methods of sex education, and as self-validation, for gay and lesbian youths. Apart from secretly puzzling over Freud's *Three Essays*, and fumbling my way through some hands-on experience, my own adolescent sexual self-education often revolved around the variations on gender and sexual defiance flaunted by Kate Bush, Culture Club, Prince and,

²⁷ Alternatively, Nickelodeon's *Ren and Stimpy Show* is structured around clear and subtler intimations of homosexuality, offers an anarchically queer angle on normative family life and patronizing children's television, and delights in bodily functions and unruly desires. The series has been marketed to children, adolescents and adults alike on Nickelodeon and MTV.

²⁸ Quoted in Samantha Glynn, 'Mad about the boy', *Attitude* (February 1995), pp. 34–5.

²⁹ In North America the film has been released on video as *Wonderland*.

needless to say, Madonna, amongst others. Equally, young gay, bisexual and 'undecided' men depend variously on the erotic charge of heterosexual film narratives, preferably involving semi-clad men, where they can enjoy the dual pleasures of identifying vicariously with the sexualized women desired by those men, and fantasizing more generally in relation to active onscreen male desire.

Nevertheless, a number of outstanding non-adult-biased representations have introduced young lesbian and gay desire into cinema and television as well, such as *Maedchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931); the censored BBC schools' drama, *Two of Us* (Roger Tonge, 1988), the BBC adaptation of Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (Beeban Kidron, 1989); Sadie Benning's teenage dyke Pixelvision diaries, including *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989) and *Jollies* (1990); the youth-narrated Canadian documentary, *Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth* (David Adkin, 1993); and *Heavenly Creatures* (Peter Jackson, 1994).²⁷ But the general unavailability of many youth homosexuality-related films (which are, unsurprisingly, often exhibited only on independent cinema and film festival circuits) means that for many lesbian or gay adolescents, gaining access to directly relevant images amounts, at best, to renting *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985) or sneaking a peek at a Derek Jarman season on late-night television. For these intrepid young viewers, the reassuring, enthralling directness of such images is heavily compromised by their basis in frustratingly adult-oriented social environments and predicaments. The same frustrations were voiced to *Brookside* scriptwriter Shaun Duggan by members of the Friend Merseyside gay youth group, during developmental workshops for his youth-oriented play *Boy*, where he heard that:

young people had seen a lot of films and plays about . . . gay people feeling comfortable and already assured of their sexuality. What they felt was missing was the very important story in between. How does an isolated gay person develop into a confident gay adult?²⁸

With this crucial question in mind, I want to turn now to *The Fruit Machine* (Peter Saville, 1988),²⁹ a film which resonates strongly with my own, and many other gay men's, teenage experiences. This low-budget British production came out at the height of debates over Clause 28 and, within this context, could be seen to indirectly contest the atrophying aims of the Clause, for its narrative follows the adventures of two runaway gay teenage friends, who discover the impossibility of escaping from threats to their developing sexual identities. However, while *The Fruit Machine* draws attention to the social constraints on youth homosexuality, its representation of gay adolescence is also compromised by an ambivalent adult framing of its young gay subjects. The film provides a rare example of an adult attempt to address teenage gay identity within the widely engaging

³⁰ In keeping with the increasing blurring of boundaries between mainstream and independent film production, distribution and exhibition (as with the success of many Channel Four-related films, or the marketing of 'New Queer Cinema'), I use 'popular' here to include films which are viewed in conventional terms as minority-oriented, but which also address and/or reach wide audiences. In the case of *The Fruit Machine*, its relatively popular format enabled it to open in West End Cannon cinemas.

³¹ I take 'femininity' and 'masculinity' to be patriarchal cultural constructions, never essentially connected to a person's biological sex. While these constructions are most often used oppressively to authenticate and impose normative gender and sexual identities, their cultural ubiquity also renders them available for gender resistance or denaturalization (whether mundane or audacious, in fantasy or material life). In general, embodying the gender codes that are socially expected of you in a parodic or consciously hyperbolic way carries less of a sense of cultural transgression than having a primary identification with the 'other' gender, although the latter mode also remains open to recuperation. For influential discussions of gender performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and her less abstract *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990 and 1993).

Eddie and Michael, *The Fruit Machine*. Picture courtesy: BFI Stills/Granada Film.

terms of popular cinema.³⁰ But as it progresses, its savvy pleasures are increasingly informed by restrictive adult paradigms for understanding young gay sexuality.

The Fruit Machine's opening scenes use a complex blend of high camp, intertextuality, melodrama and social realism to dramatize the daily resistance to physical and psychic punishment which often constitutes family life for openly gay, and especially 'feminine'-identified, male youths.³¹ Sixteen-year-old Eddie, a wide-eyed working-class suburban queen from Liverpool with a heart of gold, endures his father's violent homophobia by revelling in the glamorous myths his star-struck mother spins about her past, and by sharing her passion for the romantic classics of British and Hollywood cinema. The film's first scenes make unusually positive connections between Eddie's mutually protective relationship with his bleached-blond mother and his fan identification with Marilyn Monroe, thus foregrounding the maternal origins and connotations of many gay men's diva devotions, something that gay culture both celebrates and disavows in its rejection of sexist popular myths of the gay man's 'overbearing' mother.

At the same time, Eddie's investment in the favoured icons and images of gay male culture is presented not only as much-needed escapism, but also as hard-earned self-validation and indirect cultural critique. Like the rarely seen and never heard pre-adult homosexuality of the *Three Essays*, Eddie's pleasures occur within the heterosexually-defined 'queer time' of gay puberty, wherein gay youths are made to experience a form of 'deferred adolescence', involving a restricted rate of sexual development in relation to the



³² The present disparity between the British heterosexual and homosexual 'ages of consent' provides the most blatant current legal example of how this imposed 'queer time' is maintained.

³³ Obviously, lesbian gender dissidence (like gender in masculine-identified gay culture) is more likely to involve replacing or combining feminized glamour with butch and traditionally masculine codes; though not necessarily so.

culturally validated heterosexual youth's experiences.³² Indeed, by comparison, those straight sexual identities often exist in a fast-forward temporality, with adult hands ready to embrace the first signs of adolescent heterosexuality and hence steer teenagers around sexual experimentation towards the culturally sanctioned goals of domesticated romance and matrimony. In this context, Eddie is shown attempting to speed up the enforced slow motion of his sexual development, as he constructs his own counteractive queer time and space in a world of rhapsodic movies and imagined stardom. Replaying his favourite moments from these glitzy narratives, he edits out any dull or painful moments in his own life, and seeks solace in a fantasy world of stylish femininity which provides him with countless opportunities for resisting, and venting his frustration at, the cultural idealization of heterosexual masculinity.

Moreover, in this case at least, the familiar gay or lesbian search for agency through gender dissidence and pop culture citation becomes the catalyst for a brief, but highly significant, rupture in the heterocentric culture surrounding Eddie's feminine sanctuary.³³ As Eddie and his mother watch *Niagara* (Henry Hathaway, 1953) under the disapproving gaze of his father, Eddie's intense identification with Monroe's escape from her threatening husband serves as a displaced commentary both on his parents' relationship, and on his own desire to escape paternal control. *The Fruit Machine* reinforces these intertextual connections with a series of crosscuts between Monroe escaping and the polarized family viewers, and in doing so, enacts its own appropriation of Hollywood in order to denaturalize patriarchal domesticity. More importantly, though, Eddie also vocalizes his support for Monroe's endangered femininity by calling out at the television screen, and it is this explicit declaration of allegiance to his icon within the male-dominated domestic space which precipitates a chain of events wherein barely concealed family hostilities rush to the surface to be confronted. For as Eddie's father leaps up to turn off the television and launches into name-calling ('fuckin' nancy'), Eddie parodies and challenges his phobic contempt for feminine queers (*Dad*: 'Where do you think *you're* going?' *Eddie*: 'To back-comb me hair, iron me skirt, and put me make-up on'). As his father resorts to violence, Eddie resolutely stands his ground, aided by his mother's sharp verbal defence (*Dad*: 'Look at him. Even walks like a fuckin' poof.' *Mum*: 'Why, know many of them, do you?').

Having established the common problematics of home life for gay youths, the film moves beyond dysfunctional family drama to engage with the far less documented dynamics of teenage gay friendship. A phone call from his sixteen-year-old friend, Michael, gives Eddie an opportunity to act on his growing impulse to leave home. Michael has just escaped from the juvenile detention centre his mother sent him to for being gay, and wants Eddie to come away with him. As Eddie agrees to meet him later and rings off, we see a middle-aged man

³⁴ Conrad, one of the participants in the documentary *Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth*, remembers: 'I hadn't dealt with being gay yet, but I was sitting in a gay bar drinking'.

³⁵ Scriptwriter Frank Clarke partly intended Echo to be 'the embodiment of [AIDS]', a crass metaphor which is entirely unclear and unsuccessful within the film. However, Clarke also saw the assassin character as emblematic of 'bigotry'. Quoted in Jack Babuscio, 'Captive creatures', *Gay Times* (November 1988), p. 29.

putting his coin into the fruit (or slot) machine Michael is playing, providing the first indication that the homeless boy is turning to servicing male punters to survive on the streets. That night, led by Michael, the underage boys charm their way into The Fruit Machine, a local gay club run by drag queen hostess-with-the-mostest Anabelle. Here Eddie makes his first nervous contact with commercial gay culture, allowing the film to dramatize one of the very few spaces where teenagers with the right contacts, and enough money and self-command, can experience the thrills and crushing disappointments of young gay desire, and can begin to insert themselves, however uneasily, into those self-validating and culturally bonding lesbian and gay identities constructed by adults. On the other hand, as Eddie's and Michael's interdependence in *The Fruit Machine* underlines, the young adult-oriented gay scene rarely provides the kinds of peer support and understanding that even younger gay boys require.³⁴ Nor can the relative protection of these commercial gay spaces guarantee safety against wider, and encroaching, homophobic hostility and violence. The film embodies general anti-gay cultural disapproval, and its most murderous manifestations, in the figure of Echo, a machete-wielding, gay-hating assassin sent by gangsters to close The Fruit Machine down. (Echo, as his name suggests, also serves as an externalized memory of Eddie's father's attacks and, less convincingly, as a reminder of the onslaught of HIV/AIDS.)³⁵ Thus, at the end of the evening, Eddie and Michael accidentally witness Anabelle's death at the hands of Echo. Chased from the scene of the crime, the boys gatecrash an upmarket after-show party at a local theatre, and make friends with fading opera star Vincent Barbieri, who takes them to Brighton and then starts exacting payment in the form of sexual favours from Michael.

In one sense, uneroticized Vincent acts as a temporary replacement for Eddie's mother, and provides Eddie with a major link between his domestic fandom and the outside world: at the beginning of the film, we see Eddie's mother's fake signed photo of herself with Maria Callas, and when Eddie first meets Vincent he tells the star that he listens to all of his mother's Vincent Barbieri records at home. Yet in another, more foregrounded sense, Vincent's sexual demands on Michael behind Eddie's back emphasize that the ageing gay singer's economic, cultural and adult advantages over the working-class boys are largely maintained by his closeted exploitation of a new generation of gay youths, who, with the benefit of some increase in peer support and adult role models during the 1980s, are unwilling or unable to disguise their desires.

In still another sense, though, the film's representation of Vincent allows it to focus on enforced intergenerational sexual relations at the expense of the boys' own active, or even mutual, gay desires. Hence, before the group reaches Brighton, while Eddie chats with Vincent at the post-performance party, Michael is caught pickpocketing the

³⁶ Joint Council for Gay Teenagers, 'I know what I am: gay teenagers and the law', in Daniel Tsang (ed.), *The Age Taboo: Gay Male Sexuality, Power and Consent* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1981), p. 85. See this collection for a cross-section of gay/lesbian/feminist debates on the complex dynamics of intergenerational same-sex relationships.

³⁷ At the same time, heteropatriarchal discourses frequently condone and fetishize cross-generational sexual contact between men and younger women/girls, and between young women and younger men/boys, but generally not between older women and younger men/boys.

guests' coats by Vincent's female business associate, who promptly lets Michael off the hook in exchange for a night of pleasure in Brighton. Tellingly, this coercive heterosexual tryst provides the film's most explicit sexual moment, as it dwells on a vampish woman's ecstasies over her younger, grimacing, male partner.

In this scene, and in the sequences involving Vincent Barbieri, the depiction of adult sexual opportunism also takes precedence over the consensual cross-generational relations which characterize the social and sexual lives of many gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers. As the British Joint Council for Gay Teenagers stressed in 1981, on the whole, the cultural denial of pre-adult homosexuality restricts the ways in which lesbian and gay youths can interrelate sexually or otherwise 'to ones that are furtive and unsatisfactory to themselves'.³⁶ Given this predicament, intergenerational relations may make it possible to meet in safer environments and, even in the limited form of a brief encounter, often enable youths to experience a fleeting connection with adults who have already achieved some degree of sexual self-definition.

Of course, while even the most egalitarian adult-youth erotic relations are commonly pathologized, especially through homophobic myths of the persistent threat of adult 'gay molesters',³⁷ popular culture has always addressed, and actively encouraged, adolescent erotic desires and fantasies relating to adults. *The Fruit Machine* articulates these cross-generational fantasies from the marginalized perspective of a gay teenager, and hence produces its own popular cultural address of adolescent gay desires through a series of fantasy sequences dreamt by Eddie. The dreams chart key moments in his sexual development, provoking and enabling him to process his increasing move away from an often debilitating family life towards sexual self-identification. Central to this countering of heterocentricity with fantasy is the appearance of a seductive, but also sinister and elusive, handsome older stranger in each dream, an ambivalent motif which expresses Eddie's negotiation of the contradictory desires underpinning his (and any) sexual identity.

In the first dream, a dolphin metamorphoses into the handsome stranger, who crawls, dripping, through Eddie's bedroom window, a la Scudder in *Maurice* (James Ivory, 1987). The romantic scenario indicates an increase of explicitly gay desire within the fantasy world Eddie has already created in his home life, and is indeed immediately followed by his actual escape from home into *The Fruit Machine*, where he has another momentary vision of the dream man, this time behind his own reflection in a mirror. Significantly, this second fantasy takes the form of a daydream in a gay club, suggesting the conscious intensification of Eddie's earlier sexual fantasies within a relatively supportive erotic social space. Thus, contrary to heterocentric interpretations of adolescent homosexual fantasies as meaningless delusions, the film importantly situates the sexual dreams of gay

³⁸ While the fantasy sequences reinforce the preceding narrative, their amplification and development of previous events through dream symbolism inevitably also spotlights narrative ambiguities, and produces further meanings. Here, Eddie's momentary dream kiss with an image of Monroe, rather than with his fantasy man, has the further effect of situating his gay fan admiration for the female star exactly at the meeting point of identification and desire, suggesting an ambiguously romantic inflection to his relationship with his icon. More controversially, the film's earlier connections between Monroe and Eddie's mother give the dream kiss a fainter incestuous suggestivity.

youths in an ongoing dialogue with cultural experience, which those fantasies are seen to incorporate, reshape and reflect upon.

Later, after arriving in Brighton, Eddie dreams of waking up in his old bedroom submerged underwater, where he escapes through the window to join a dolphin swimming by outside. Then, still within the dream, he wakes up in another room, now on land and decorated with more elaborate versions of the posters of female icons in his old bedroom. As he dances across the floor and reaches up to kiss an image of Monroe, the dolphin is again replaced by the smiling stranger at the window, but this time he looms even closer, his eyes sinisterly aglow. The dream therefore re-enacts, in literalized form, Eddie's escape from his suffocating home life, and condenses his anticipation and fear of sexual experience within the figure of the devilishly attractive, self-assured young adult stranger.

But more provocatively, the dream also stages Eddie's uncertainty and growing autonomy within a reassuringly feminized sexual space. Appropriately enough, the film's continuing water and dolphin imagery carries traditionally female/lesbian connotations. Within the specifics of this dream, however, the images of gay and lesbian pop culture goddesses, like Marilyn, Madonna and Bette Davis, that covered Eddie's old bedroom walls and provided the basis for his resistant gender identification and self-protection, have become a more integrated part of his emerging gay identity. These surrounding (and, as dream components, also internalized) images of resourceful and alluring female deployments of femininity serve as a silent encouraging chorus for Eddie's self-eroticizing dance before the confident masculinized gaze of his fantasy man. This dream sequence therefore allows the young dancing queen literally to position himself onscreen as a desired, feminine, gay male object. Moreover, in representing the adolescent gay fem and his desires as erotic, this sequence also removes the usually isolated young gay spectator's desire to be desirable from the margins – where he can only identify vicariously with female characters and stars, or covertly fantasize an alternative narrative – and places it centre stage.

The fantasy sequences also validate adolescent homosexuality through their shared symbol of a dolphin transforming into Eddie's dream man, implying the 'naturalness' of gay desire. Yet in this particular dream, such an asocial reading of gay desire is problematized by the suggestion of Eddie's remaining hesitancy about his own erotic deployment of femininity, as he dances away from the leering stranger to embrace the image of Monroe, who symbolizes both maternal support and a less direct means of expressing his sexuality.³⁸

Equally, at a wider level, the film's consistent representation of Eddie's dreams and visions as crucial to his growing sexual self-awareness implies that sexuality, far from being transcendently 'natural', is at base produced and sustained precisely through a

³⁹ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 25. If this description appears to contradict itself – how can an already-existing sexuality become sexuality? – it does so only in so far as any attempt to record the precise moment when sexuality first arises is doomed to failure: 'The moment is more abstract than definable in time, since it is always renewed, and must have been preceded by erotic excitation . . . for such excitation to be sought out'.

⁴⁰ More recently, *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas, 1995) has succeeded in representing active adolescent lesbian desire more directly – if also sporadically – in a major Hollywood film, through Noreen, a teenage dyke high school student with designs on her best friend, Marcia Brady. We see feisty Noreen touching Marcia under the covers during a sleepover; receiving an admiring hug from Marcia for punching her lascivious prom date; and briefly, winning Marcia over finally with a kiss, in one of the original television show's famous multiple split-screen boxes during the end credits sequence. Using the 'cover' of (rather flat) whacky comedy, and the queer backup of RuPaul's cameo as a fun-loving female school counsellor, the film nevertheless also works unusually hard to disarm any phobic audience response by constructing Noreen as a likeable character, contrasting her with vacuous and sexually pushy boys, and naturalizing her desires and point of view in relation to those of the other young characters.

non-hierarchical interaction between fantasy and cultural environment. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis have famously summarized, need becomes erotic desire at 'the moment when sexuality . . . moves into the field of fantasy and by that very fact becomes sexuality'.³⁹ In other words, both consciously and unconsciously, every sexual desire and identity is centrally informed by the psychic network of wish-fulfilling and self-defensive scenarios known collectively as fantasy. And conversely, the content and very structure of fantasy life is, of course, always dependent upon cultural information. Viewed from this angle, the repeated connections made between Eddie's nascent homosexual identity and his culturally embedded homoerotic fantasies can be seen to resist falsely homogenizing notions of gay boys simply being 'born that way', and can also be seen to refute normative notions of the biologically 'natural' heterosexual development of puberty.

However, even as *The Fruit Machine's* use of fantasy sequences gives it relative licence to represent active adolescent gay desire within a popularly pitched film,⁴⁰ the dialogue constructed between fantasy and cultural experience in Eddie's dreams becomes curiously severed as the narrative peaks. During his stay in Brighton, Eddie visits Wonderland, the local aquarium, and afterward feels an increasing connection between his own marginalized cultural position and that of the captive dolphins who perform there. On a return visit to Wonderland, he sees his fantasy man's reflection while tapping on the glass of the dolphin tank, and turns around to find Michael smiling behind him. Although Eddie's responding smile carries a hint of disappointment, this explicit conjunction of his fantasy and material worlds suggests for the first time that Michael might be the logical conclusion towards which Eddie's dreams, with their progressively tangible manifestations of a fantasy lover, have been working. This suggestion is reinforced, but then abruptly suspended, in the following scene, during the most intimate conversation so far between the boys, where Eddie comes to the brink of declaring some kind of love for his friend ('Besides my ma, you're the only person I've ever really . . .'), only to be cut short by an embarrassed 'shut up' from Michael.

The disjunction here between gushy queen and defensive lad is consistent with the boys' ongoing butch/fem double act, which provides a crucial source of spectatorial pleasure and identification throughout the narrative. Much of the film's comedy arises from their 'odd couple' disagreements (*Eddie*: 'We're just a pair of little queenettes, aren't we?' *Michael*: 'No we're not – we're lads. We're young men.'), making gender difference within sexual sameness an unusually privileged narrative motor, rather than a conventionally exoticized spectacle, and throwing into relief the unevenly disavowed homoerotics of homosocial comedy double acts along the way. The boys' polarized gender identifications are also often slyly overturned and complicated in those very moments where they are most

prominently on display, as when a panic-stricken Eddie inverts Michael's macho offer to protect him during their escape from Echo: 'You? You can't even look after yourself, let alone me.'

But while gender difference produces pleasure and agency here, it is deployed normatively elsewhere to displace the question of the boys' potentially mutual desires. Although Eddie's erotic dreams centre on a stranger who meets the white, masculine, gay cultural ideal, and although the film eroticizes Michael's body in a similar way, feminine-identified Eddie's sexual curiosity (like that of Freud's twilight homosexual adolescent) remains suspended at the level of a recurrent fantasy which is never acted upon, arresting the willed sexual development which appears tantalizingly likely to occur through his intimate friendship with Michael. Instead, homosociality is held in place by Michael's masculinism, which is only compromised by his economic dependence upon older feminine male punters. So outside of the fantasy sequences, Eddie's feminine-coded sexuality is largely patriarchally passified, in comparison to Michael's more 'potently mature', eroticized machismo.

Hence, the film's *Fruit Machine* sequences are structured by the assumption that masculine gay men are more desirable than their feminine counterparts. In the club, Michael wins the sexual approval of the drag queen judges and audience of a dance contest by stripping down to his boxer shorts, striking butch poses with his muscular body, and grinding his groin behind his far more talented drag queen competitor. Eddie watches approvingly with the other spectators as his macho friend parades his culturally privileged gender status. Similarly, while Eddie's self-eroticizing (or auto-erotic) femininity in his dreams partly opposes such masculinism, his first daydream sighting of the fantasy stranger's reflection while in the sexually charged environment of the club's toilets is followed by his bewildered retreat from two flirtatious fem boys, who block the door as he tries to search for his dream man. Here, Eddie's masculine fantasy lover functions as a distraction from an actual sexual proposition from not one, but *two* available queens, and serves as an enticing contrast to these two unerotically comic young fems who are seen as literal obstacles to Eddie's phantom object of desire.

More generally, *The Fruit Machine* reiterates these gender disparities by repeatedly characterizing racial difference through normative sexual and gender categories. The film has 'biracial', feminine Eddie deflecting his macho black father's hostility by fantasizing about an interested, but ultimately unreachable, white, masculine-coded stranger, and by identifying primarily with his white mother, and with white screen and pop goddesses. As we have already seen, Eddie is also represented as comparatively unerotic next to white, laddish, sexually experienced Michael. This is not to suggest that a young 'biracial' man should not be seen to desire or identify with whiteness, or that a black father should not be characterized as a

violent homophobe. But the film's representation of racial difference constantly invokes such prevalent presumptions regarding 'biracial', white and black male sexual and gender identities, while failing to offer up any self-conscious examination of the ways in which those standardizing cultural tropes impact upon adolescent sexual development and desire. Quite the opposite. For as a result of the film's blithely conventional representation of interracial relations and desires, its desexualized depiction of the boys together still leaves open the suggestion that Michael's clearly outlined white desirability, like his butchness, precludes the possibility of his attraction to his close friend.

Eddie's final daydream compounds *The Fruit Machine's* growing unease with its own representation of young gay desire, even when that desire is made to linger exclusively at the level of sexual fantasy. After an argument with Michael, Eddie breaks into Wonderland at night and decides to dive naked into the dolphin pool. As he swims underwater, one of the dolphins again becomes his dream lover, who is also naked now, but after some brief aquatic cavorting and a chaste embrace, the stranger disappears once more, leaving a bewildered Eddie with the dolphins. The promise of a more explicit cross-generational erotic fantasy is thus teasingly revoked, as Eddie's now confident desires are frustrated.

Less obviously, while the film has previously used dolphins to symbolize 'natural' feminine-identified desire, the dream lover's transformation from a dolphin in each dream has also continually evoked a move from 'innocence' (another popular meaning attached to protected species) to sexuality. Given the incoherence of this symbolism, Eddie's swim with the dolphins, to the accompaniment of lulling music, functions less as yet another conducive setting for his sexual fantasies, than as part of the film's adult-centred and patriarchal deployment of its dolphin imagery to literally submerge Eddie's feminine sexuality in a pool of 'innocence'. The desexualizing effects of this symbolism are made unintentionally apparent as the dream lover merges back into the dolphins which now surround Eddie and block his sexual expression: sexual fantasy has been 'returned to innocence'. Having propelled the awakening of Eddie's gay desires through fantasy, the film therefore backtracks precisely at the moment when Eddie's naked, desiring body signifies adolescent gay sexuality most clearly, although his naked contact with the fantasy man does allow momentarily for eroticism.

With Eddie's developing sexuality already symbolically drowned as he emerges from the dolphin pool, the narrative further confounds the possibility of reciprocal, or even unrequited, adolescent gay desire, as Echo (who has tracked the boys down to Brighton) suddenly attacks and maims the young murder witness. In one sense, Echo's murderous pursuit of Michael and Eddie throughout the film has worked to establish audience empathy and identification with the imperilled

⁴¹ Previously, Anabelle's death prevented the boys from taking up her offer to 'come again' to *The Fruit Machine*. Similarly, while searching for the boys, Echo finds and kills Vincent, just as Michael, who has given up servicing the opera star, is having an affectionate discussion with Eddie elsewhere: when Eddie finds Vincent dying, he blames Michael and they fall out until Echo's final attack at Wonderland.

young protagonists, whose attempts to escape the villain provide the generic pleasures of the thriller, and exemplify not only their cultural fragility, but also adolescent gay ingenuity. However, as Eddie's injury after his most erotically suggestive fantasy reinforces, Echo's attacks also always interrupt moments of potential or actual gay intimacy, indicating the film's increasing use of compelling generic conventions to displace, rather than drive, its initially gay youth-oriented narrative.⁴¹

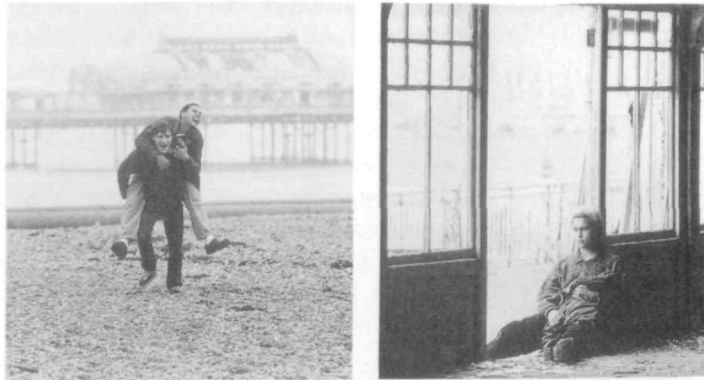
In a final move even further away from its preceding articulation of young gay desires and experiences, *The Fruit Machine* runs into blatant narrative incoherence. Michael arrives at Wonderland in the nick of time, fights with and eventually manages to drown Echo, and takes his wounded friend to a deserted pier before going off to find help. But while passing Wonderland again, he gets delayed when he sees Eddie's favourite ageing dolphin, Sooty, about to be transported to its death, and attempts to free the animal by driving off with dolphin in tow. The police give chase, but Michael's inexperienced driving conveniently lands him in the sea, where he is saved by none other than Eddie's fantasy man, who turns out to be the dolphin he has freed. Unsurprisingly, Michael's heroic diversion makes him too late to save Eddie, who dies soon after he returns.

Several outright and more subtle contradictions overlap here. In the context of the film's obscure use of Echo as a metaphor for AIDS, Eddie's death would appear to have been caused by his own remarkably restrained dreams and fantasies; bizarrely, the least risky sexual practice is deemed fatal. This fanciful implication becomes all the more evasive in the light of Eddie's death on an abandoned pier, one of the prime sites for impromptu male sex recognized throughout gay culture and fiction.

In a similar vein, these closing sequences can be seen to unintentionally dramatize the repressive, even fatal, effects of heterocentric adult discourses which trivialize and disavow adolescent gay desire. Thus, the film's preoccupation with its 'free Sooty' subplot, where a gay adolescent saves the film's symbol of innocence while its other central gay protagonist weakens offscreen, unconsciously narrativizes heterocentric adult myths of the inconsequential 'innocence' of young homosexual desires. Moreover, Eddie's unseen deterioration indirectly reveals the hidden cost of these imposed myths for adolescent gay self-esteem and survival, and signals that the notion of a gay 'phase' is maintained only by actively suppressing the material and imaginary realities of pre-adult homosexuality.

The move away from narrative logic in these concluding scenes also arises from the film's disengagement of fantasy from its cultural context. Where Eddie's dreams and visions previously responded to his material circumstances, enabling him to imagine and seek out an alternative reality, here fantasy becomes supernatural, as Michael is

Life and death in Brighton,
The Fruit Machine. Picture
 courtesy: BFI Stills/Granada
 Film.



saved underwater by Eddie's fantasy man. In a moment which employs one of the dominant tactics used in adult-centred fictions produced for children's consumption, the film's despecification of fantasy coincides with its privileging of a blandly transcendental symbol of 'natural innocence' over the complex cultural intersections of sexuality, gender, class and race on display up to this point. In this way, the direct address of adolescent gay desires and predicaments established earlier on is displaced by adult-serving signifiers.

Hence, as in other recuperatively 'magical' narratives, *The Fruit Machine*'s hasty transcendence of material and psychic relations attempts to wish away the overt signposts of cultural struggle, but is unable to escape the traces and effects that those struggles produce. In fact, as so often, the invocation of supernatural forces here goes hand in hand with the film's premature, and normative, resolution of its central conflicts.⁴² Michael's symbolic release of 'innocence' lets the film's white, masculine, young hero have the last (desexualized) moment of contact with Eddie's white masculine dream man, while the film's gently subversive dreamer lies neglected elsewhere, awaiting the traditional cinematic fate of sexually confident black, feminine-identified and female characters. Eddie's stoic death may well invite all the identificatory empathy and reflective pleasures of melodrama, implying that gay youth is a time spent resisting or succumbing to a tightly woven mesh of cultural restrictions. Yet the poignancy of this unprecedentedly explicit visualization of gay adolescent loss and death is heavily tempered by its absolute interruption of the progressively intimate bond between Eddie and Michael.⁴³

This disappointment is especially pronounced given the brief, ambiguous-to-the-last romanticization of the boys' bond at the moment of Eddie's death, when Michael finally tells his friend 'I love you', insisting that 'we've only just begun our adventures, no-one can catch us', and tries in vain to revive him with a choked version of 'Running Wild', Eddie's favourite Monroe number from *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). In a sense, Michael's rendition of a song he

⁴² Compare, for example, the naturalization of patriarchal structures through a fantasy creature in *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), and through anthropomorphized animals in Disney films like *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) and *The Lion King* (1994).

⁴³ More evasively gay-coded representations of adolescent male death include Plato in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), and the suicidal young 'frustrated actor' in *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989).

butchly chastised his friend for singing earlier in the film connects him momentarily, but also suggestively, with Eddie's femininity. Yet in turn, Eddie's martyr-like death to Marilyn's tune finally renders his previously forthright feminine sexuality and his defiant embrace of female icons in the pitying and passifying terms conventionally bestowed upon fem gay men, upon gay identifications with female stars, and upon those culturally pervasive images of compelling women themselves. Ultimately, then, while *The Fruit Machine* would have us believe that its adolescent protagonists' desires and identities have been stopped in their tracks purely by wider social pressures, it is the film's own nervous adult stifling of teenage homosexual fantasy and cultural expression which prevents young gay desire from 'running wild'.

However, this retreat from the diverse pleasures and cultural critique provided throughout much of the narrative also needs to be contextualized within the film's fraught production history. Funding for the film was secured on the strength of scriptwriter Frank Clarke's lucrative previous involvement in the 1985 minor box-office hit *A Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard),⁴⁴ and *The Fruit Machine* was promoted very much as Clarke's baby, with reviews, interviews and the film poster all working to make his role in the proceedings as conspicuous as possible. But by Clarke's own account, his compromised position as the only prominent gay man amongst an almost exclusively heterosexual and heterocentric production team meant that he 'had to throw fuckin' tantrums *every single day* just to get gay people represented'.⁴⁵ Predictably, a number of mainstream critical responses to the film were dismissive of its textured representation of teenage gay fantasy, while Nigel Andrews's bitchily homophobic review in *The Financial Times* sought to pathologize Clarke in precisely those patriarchally adult-centred terms challenged by Eddie's presence in *The Fruit Machine*:

The brain of a demented infant appears to have invaded the body of scriptwriter Frank Clarke Our Merseyside scribe has taken a pen, or perhaps a crayon, or perhaps a stick of Mum's lipstick, and scrawled the most truly crazy film of this – or any recent – British movie year.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Clarke's description of Eddie and Michael in an interview as 'fragile as flowers in hell They are *so* young',⁴⁷ and his juxtaposition of the boys with increasingly distracting dolphin imagery, clearly implicate him in the film's halting depiction of adolescent gay sexuality. The alleged antagonisms between gay scriptwriter and heterocentric filmmakers offer one explanation for the heavily contradictory display of young gay sexual and gender identity in the film. But at the same time, *The Fruit Machine*'s growing reliance upon culturally embedded equations between sexual inexperience and sexual innocence, and between adolescence and

⁴⁴ Recounted by Clarke in 'Strange fruit', an interview with Bill McCoid in *Gay Life* (November 1988), p. 27.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Babuscio, 'Captive creatures', p. 30. According to Clarke, the remarkably high percentage of drag queen clientele applauding Michael's performance in *The Fruit Machine* appeared against his wishes, 'because [. . . director Peter Saville] believes everyone who's gay is a transvestite or drags up If I had shot it, it would've been more in line with what we're used to – . . . seedy and fabulous and camp.' Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁶ Nigel Andrews, 'Year of the body swap', *The Financial Times*, 21 October 1988.

⁴⁷ Quoted in 'Strange fruit', p. 27.

⁴⁸ For a contrasting example from a heterosexual male director/scriptwriter, see the uncompromised representation of intergenerational homosexual love in Roeland Kerbosch's beautiful film, *Voor een Verloren Soldaat/For a Lost Soldier* (1993).

exclusively fantasmatic desires, highlights the fact that adult-centred framings of pre-adult sexuality are not inherently determined by sexual orientation; rather, they are frequently produced in gay as well as straight discourse.⁴⁸

For much of its running time, then, *The Fruit Machine* provides exactly the kind of intricate and engaging representation of gay teenagers moving precariously towards sexual self-definition that the gay youth group members I mentioned earlier were looking for. However, the film's rare, direct popular address of adolescent gay fantasies and predicaments stops short of answering young spectators' further desires for youth-oriented images which not only acknowledge the cultural and experiential distance between the teenage 'isolated gay person' and the 'confident gay adult', but also combat heterosexual presumption by visualizing the pre-adult realization of gay or lesbian sexuality. While *The Fruit Machine* does initially convey the possibility and reality of gay adolescent self-validation and erotic expression, its anxious refusal to carry through the implications of its own bold premise serves as a reminder of the pervasive influence of adult-centred, and heterocentric, paradigms for framing gay youth.

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debate:

**'I clipped your wing, that's all':
auto-erotism and the female
spectator in *The Piano* debate**

SUZY GORDON

The three articles in '*The Piano* debate' (*Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3) are all involved in a struggle to negotiate a better deal for femininity. All are caught up in the work of asking why a film so evidently in the market for women's desires can also prove so troubling for its female spectators. How this visual displeasure might be recouped as a condition of the film's compulsive attraction for its female and feminist audiences forms the basis of my questioning of both the film and the articles, all of which fail fully to conceptualize the degree of negativity through which the film works the possibility of female desire.

The Piano critiques cinematic scopic conventions by pressurizing the concept of identification as that most vexed of categories for feminist film theory. For what happens when a film requires its spectators to identify with a narrative voice that apparently exceeds the terms of filmic representation itself? Indeed, what might it mean to be asked to identify with a woman at the moment of her death? All three articles in '*The Piano* debate' occlude the points of danger these questions open up.

On first reading '*The Piano* debate', I was struck by the curious sense that something *else* had gone missing, in addition to all three articles' loss of a referent for the negativity that the film entertains in

its account of female desire. Something both more and less than the brutal violence (attempted rape, 'castration') depicted onscreen: 'more' because the film stages a potentially unlimited replay of that violence as an affect of cinematic spectatorship; and 'less' because the final violation of the woman's body is rehearsed at repeated moments of spectatorship within the film. In other words, the kind of violence that somehow goes missing in the debate's attempt to 'positivize' female sexuality inhabits the conditions and conventions of cinematic looking itself, and thereby doubles up in the attempt to call such violence to account. This response, therefore, works from the premise that if the possibility for the woman's empowerment continually derives from the scene of her disempowerment, as it so evidently does in *The Piano*, then we need to court the dangers of that negativity in order to contend that female desire and identification are neither naively masochistic, nor purely a functional other or Lacanian lack-bank for male desires. I will argue that the concept of auto-erotism provides a model that rethinks subjectivity and objectification in such a way as to allow us to entertain that negativity, but not to drown in its depths.

Negativity addresses my anxiety over the way Ada's survival and desire is worked through the film on the condition of an explicitly masochistic pleasure in her objectification (the mutual sexual relationship is predicated on the translation of sexual favours and body parts into piano keys), as well as of the actual bodily violation she undergoes: 'castration', incarceration, attempted rape, aborted suicide. The concept of negativity particularly concerns the translation of those pains and pleasures through a feminist spectatorship, which the film clearly solicits, that must derive its enjoyment from their replay as a condition of their renunciation. Negativity, then, is the mechanism by which destructiveness can exert a threat on, and provide the means for, the subject.

In Freud's example of the fort/da game, from which he theorizes the 'instinct for mastery' and revenge, that vengeful entry into the symbolic domain is quite clearly masochistic *per se*: it is an attempt to master the pain of loss and so produce pleasure.¹ Only the presence of the subject's desire can register masochism proper, and yet it is only the illusion of the subject's presence, granted by the loss and recovery of an object, that can transcribe this masochistic dynamic. By implication, *The Piano* itself works as a form of revenge on the institution of cinematic looking, predicated on the objectification and traumatization of the woman, and so gets caught up in a wilful replay of the problems from which it derives its critique. Significantly, masochism could be said to describe the repeated recall of an object that was never really 'there' at all, because it was only ever an object in fantasy. But the feminist imperative to call to account modes of public fantasy has locked 'The Piano debate' into recasting the film's own dilemma, and has thereby closed down the possibility for the dangerous identifications the film solicits. It is this difficulty and

1 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11 (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 285.

2 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1973), *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 46.

3 Ibid.

4 See Sigmund Freud, *Negation* (1925), Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11 (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 435–42; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–4* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 289–97.

5 Stella Bruzzi, 'Tempestuous petticoats: costume and desire in *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), p. 257.

6 Sue Gillett, 'Lips and fingers: Jane Campion's *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), p. 281.

7 Ibid., p. 280.

paradox of the masochistic subject that, in *The Piano*, introduces the concept of auto-erotism: 'that moment . . . when sexuality draws away from its natural object . . . [and] . . . finds itself delivered over to phantasy',² thereby existing as sexuality itself. Auto-erotism, here, as the very fantasy move in which the drama of representation as vengeful recall is set out, recapitulates the negativity of such a move. Like Ada's first fetishized, then dismembered body, the auto-erotic body is still, and already, in pieces, thus 'impl[ying] a different frame of reference from that of the relation to the object'.³

My use of negativity here also owes its particular resonance to Freud's concept of negation, and Lacan's response to it.⁴ For Freud, 'negation' marks the discovery, through transference, of a thought that makes itself known by means of its denial. Such a thought can only be known by virtue of its very unknowability, its unentertainability; it recalls both the inquiry around the figure of the mute woman (the crisis of the loss of words) and equally the possibility for dangerous desires (the desire for death, objectification). That is, the functioning of negation goes beyond the pleasure principle, and with it, beyond the upkeep of the subject as we might 'know' her. From the very first, then, the prospect of negativity and female desire is at issue in this reading of the film as an attempt to revise the thinking that would pit a 'positive' against a 'negative' reading. What I hope will become clear in the course of my analysis is that this concept of negativity, the desire for self-annihilation as the condition for any self in the first place, makes auto-erotism particularly conversant with the structure of belief in *The Piano*: that which purports to be most unbelievable has to be believed.

Sue Gillett opens with a piece of imaginative writing that runs the filmic diegesis together with a fictional reworking of what Stella Bruzzi calls Ada's 'fierce[ly] independen[t]' voice.⁵ The closing passage makes the contradictory stance of the woman's voice and the question of the spectator's identification central to the 'death . . . [that] has enabled'⁶ life:

I am learning to speak. My sound is still so bad I feel ashamed. I practice only when I am alone and it is dark. I think of my piano, silent in its ocean grave. I am alive.⁷

In the film, the first three sentences accompany Ada, in voiceover, pacing back and forth in her Nelson home, a black scarf draped over her head and voicing consonants. The penultimate sentence frames the image of Ada's dead body as it is suspended beneath the sea by the weight of the piano attached to her foot. The final phrase does not appear in the film. To suggest that it is in staging her own suicide that the woman feels most alive would also be to imply the possibility of an explicitly female pleasure in her deathly objectification/inanimation, and the further possibility that it is in courting this negativity that the woman can live at all. It is absolutely symptomatic of the debate's

8 Ibid., p. 281.

foreclosure on *The Piano*'s ambivalence that Gillett rewrites this moment of the impossibility for the film's narrative, of the point of danger onto which the film's double ending opens, as a moment of affirmation and 'balance'.⁸

The deathliness of female desire is conveyed to the spectator in this final scene in particular, in so far as she is privy to Ada's consciousness to the point of a curious distinction between seeing and be(liev)ing: Ada is, after all, not dead. This peculiar structure of belief suggests that if looking can reveal something that is otherwise unentertainable (Ada's suicide), the visible is nonetheless (still) merely a screen on something that resounds with the dangers of the real. 'Feeling alive' would in this case be the possibility of being captured quite dead in the gaze at the same time as being elsewhere. And yet these closing scenes dramatically indicate the impossibility of such a space. For who is learning to speak here? Who is speaking? Where is she? It is only via speech in the first place that we could have access to Ada's 'mind's voice'. The point is not simply that the voiceover retrospective is inadequate and anachronistic, but that even at the end of the film it is out of time and place; where it pretends to narrative closure, the present woman and the presence of the woman is still deferred. Hence neither the category of subject nor object can be adequately deployed in this temporal, spatial and scopic locale.

The closing scenes of *The Piano* encapsulate the structure of belief through which the film stakes out its question to an identification that sets the limits on filmic enunciation. In the final scene, in particular, the onscreen 'object', which is by turns both doubly 'there' and 'not-there' (Ada's dead body is suspended on the screen as her voiceover narrates the shot; and yet, here, visibly, she is dead, aurally she is a misnomer), means that the spectator plays out a masochistic reality-effect from a position of narrative knowledge that is, nonetheless, virtually impossible.

9 Ibid., pp. 277, 278.

Gillett's narrative voice depicts negativity as a shoring up of physicality, the 'lip-closed stubbornness', against a 'language of entrances and exits' that would 'tunnel through . . . skin'.⁹ Letting neither anything out nor anyone in, this fantasy of a hermetic and boundaried body, *both transparent and concealing*, compacts the ambivalence of a refusal that would provide both for the subject's survival and its literal disintegration. This is a language which would quite literally close her down by opening her up: 'I cannot be forced open You would lose what you are trying to find and we would both be damaged.'¹⁰ Gillett's narrative interprets Ada's muteness as precisely the move by which her silence resists such definition. Gillett's piece, then, dramatizes the film's own narrative paradox: the filling in of Ada's loss of words. But her reading also suggests that, since silence certainly implies a refusal to refuse, Ada's muteness might also refuse the terms by which it can be cast as a resistance. Ada's imagined speech again evidences that the negativity of this

10 Ibid., p. 278.

stance is constituted in the symbolic it rails against, hence that the refusal to refuse will ultimately be cast as consent. Consent does, however, demand that there be a subject present to agree (or disagree) in the first place. What the doubling of refusal attains is, in effect, an albeit tenuous repudiation of the kind of subjectivity that would allow it to be construed as (either refusal or) consent.

I am not suggesting that the woman, or the spectator, is consigned to a masochistic desire *per se*. But I do propose, to the extent that *The Piano* provides a commentary on the negativity of female desire and female spectatorship, that this negativity is inextricable from the sexually differentiated dynamics of cinematic looking. Gillett's concern that Ada's seduction is not rape addresses most clearly what is at stake for femininity as a potentially 'positive' category in the film. Gillett's position is clear: Ada's seduction is not rape because Ada makes a 'measured choice',¹¹ and defines the terms of her objectification. It is precisely the ambivalent posture of this latter negativity – definitional subject-status is accorded with the loss of subjectivity – by which *The Piano* as critique is captivated, and which Gillett's reading is an attempt to counter. Indeed, the interpretation of Ada's bargaining power in this instance reads so convincingly like the illusion of mastery and revenge through which masochism works the desire for pain, that the question as to whether the woman's desire is masochistic sounds thoroughly out of place here. If Ada's 'seduction' is rape, the category of rape disappears (the argument against the film as misogynist), but so does the possibility for consent as that very category through which desire is attached to a subject, through which the conscious subject can be thought at all. Ada's consent to the sexual relationship with Baines is clearly not the issue here: the sex is not against her will. The 'economic relations which order sexual relations'¹² exceed the language of consent. And yet the 'loss' of the consenting (or resisting) subject reveals an impasse where we are being asked to choose between the elimination of the woman's desire and the elimination of the woman. The terms of such a 'choice', however, are illusory – think back to the negations of desire without which the subject cannot 'be' in the first place.

Ada is, nonetheless, constantly threatened with actual rape. Thus the film distinguishes crucially between a desire which would entirely efface the possibilities for desire in the first place (masochism proper), and desire as the most rudimentary staging of the impossibility of desire (masochism as a condition of subjectivity). The reading of seduction as rape dispenses with the necessity for a subject that is either consensual or resisting (also the ambivalent position for the feminist spectator), it does not decline the category of the subject *per se*. *The Piano* thus situates its question of the dangers of identification within a challenge to the broader spectrum of feminist debate that demands either victimization or pleasure, terrorization or heroism, reality or fantasy. This, then, is also the terrain of

¹¹ Ibid., p. 286.

¹² Ibid., p. 283.

feminism's always uneasy but necessary relationship with psychoanalysis.

The auto-erotic component to fantasy allows us to conceptualize a subject which is 'pre-subjectal', and 'receives his existence . . . from without, before a distinction between within and without is achieved'.¹³ Hence auto-erotism would allow for a mode of participation that exceeds the logic of either consent or non-consent to pain, precisely because the subject is not yet present to endure that pain. Auto-erotism stages the ambivalent moment in which the very dislocation of fantasy from an object reiterates their mutual encounter: 'the natural mode of apprehending the object is split: the sexual function . . . detaches itself from the non-sexual functions . . . upon which it has heretofore depended anacritically and which have laid down its aim and object'.¹⁴ In other words, fantasy carries the destructiveness the object portends precisely in so far as it gets detached from the object. The auto-erotic origin of fantasy, then, provides a model for both incorporating and 'putting on hold' the negativity of the lost object as a condition of the subject *per se*. The sense in which negativity might be held in suspense makes clear the coexistence, indeed the absolute commensurability, of the possibility of the woman's pleasure in her own objectification – the desire to be desired – with her demand for autonomy and alterity.

The question of auto-erotism is explicitly raised in *The Piano* in the scene where Ada kisses her reflection in a hand-held mirror whilst Stewart barricades her in the house. Indeed, the 'lips that kiss themselves' have been said to reference auto-erotism *par excellence*.¹⁵ Gillett reads this moment as an 'amplification' of Ada's 'longing', which refuses to support Stewart's 'imaginary'.¹⁶ In this case, auto-erotic activity gets read as a refusal to support male desire, as Ada's resistance to her objectification, and hence, here, as her 'active' desire. The compact of refusal and objectification through which this scene in fact works the possibility for Ada's desire, however, can only be thought through an auto-erotic pleasure that dissolves 'all distinction between subject and object',¹⁷ hence the eradication of an 'active' desire as such. This scene recapitulates an earlier one in which Stewart's use of Ada's portrait as a mirror explicates an economy of the look in which the woman would support the male subject's imaginary only in so far as her otherness bars him from the desire of, or for, that other. The malignancy of this identificatory look resides in the subject's aggression towards, and incorporation of, the other. The aggression of the male subject's relation to the imaged other, however, works so as to return that malignant look to himself via the reflection the woman's image grants him. In a sense, then, the masochistic male subject is nevertheless a subject even though – precisely because – the support of an object/other might fail. But the film uses this scene as an explanation for, and derivative of, the patriarchal exchange of women into which Ada is ultimately admitted as bargaining subject. I think

¹³ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality' (1964), in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 11.

¹⁴ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Laplanche and Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality', p. 25.

¹⁶ Gillett, 'Lips and fingers', p. 278.

¹⁷ Laplanche and Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality', p. 24.

¹⁸ Kerry Goldsworthy, 'What music is', *Arena magazine*, no. 8 (1993), p. 47. Cited in Gillett, 'Lips and fingers', p. 286.

¹⁹ Gillett, 'Lips and fingers', pp. 283, 282.

Gillett's reading of this process of exchange misses the ease with which Ada inserts herself, the skill at turning herself into an object, which predicates her entry as a subject of the transaction, so as to 'beat him [Baines] down'.¹⁸

Gillett describes Baines's 'experience of his own femininity' as an experience of the perpetuation of longing, the non-reciprocity of desire: 'his desire is for her desire' which 'does not exist in market terms'.¹⁹ The male subject's experience of 'feminine' desire does nevertheless become marketable in the economy of return: Ada ultimately loves Baines. Her desire mirrors his, it is constituted in the *staging* of the non-reciprocity of desire. Thus female desire becomes marketable in predicating its very impossibility. Masochistic male desire here is also part of a logic of recuperation where the impossibility of desire's absent object *can be substituted*. Here, it is the woman's desire that stands in for the return on the man's. The question of the woman's desire, then, continually shifts from the proximity of the object to its absolute inalienation. Indeed, auto-erotism similarly teeters on the brink of masochism proper, and ultimately suicide. The scene of the lips that kiss themselves, then, circumscribes precisely the mutual association of danger and enablement that complicates, and makes especially apposite, the relation of auto-erotism to *The Piano*. The reflective force of the auto-erotic kiss here actually holds at bay the immediacy of her incarceration (Stewart's urgent hammering slips away from the soundtrack) in the very instant it ensnares Ada in replaying the scopic economy of objectification. If the possibility for the woman's 'active' gaze cannot be thought of outside a kind of scopic incarceration, it also provides the very ammunition of her resistance.

In 'Tempestuous petticoats', Stella Bruzzi suggests that masochism is in fact a condition of the male dependency on the look, and hence that *The Piano* subverts the classically voyeuristic and fetishistic economy of looking in the cinema by disengaging the male subject from the 'active gaze'. In closing off the distance so crucial to the fetish, Bruzzi is, nonetheless, forgetting that the onscreen look and touch are also the object of a cinematic gaze that is not necessarily male and that is, in *The Piano*, quite explicitly feminist. Where Bruzzi's thesis fails to account for the violence that is still very explicitly bound up in the economy of the (admittedly 'masochistic') male characters' look at the woman's body, it is because to do so would inevitably suggest that the female, indeed feminist, spectator might be complicit in the fetishization and objectification of the onscreen woman. It is symptomatic of Bruzzi's attempt to define female desire as both alterity and positivity that the sexual violence which infringes on any enunciation of that desire goes missing precisely to the extent that the female/feminist spectator is being called on to 'identify'.

Bruzzi's account of touch as a feminine alternative to the masculine

²⁰ See Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the masquerade: theorising the female spectator', *Screen*, vol. 23, nos 3–4 (1982), pp. 74–87.

²¹ Bruzzi, 'Tempestuous petticoats', p. 263.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

look loses any sense of the way in which that reading also sets out femininity as locus of the self-immolating consequences of proximity. More explicitly, the concept of proximity, by erasing any difference or separation between subject and object, would premise female desire with an explicitly auto-erotic dispensation of liminal states: an indistinction between subject and object that maps out a borderline position between life and death. If the closing off of distance is in any sense to displace the dominance of the fetishistic look, then a nominal proximity must take account of the negativity it introduces. As far as *The Piano* is concerned, that negativity attaches itself to both the diegetic female subject as well as to the female spectator.

Bruzzi also draws her analysis from Mary Ann Doane's concept of the performative, hence subversive, potential of the feminine masquerade.²⁰ But, holding femininity at a distance works as a 'feminist strategy'²¹ only in so far as Ada's clothes 'function for and against her'.²² Here, distance is enabling in spite of the fact that, or precisely because, it works ambivalently with respect to feminine and feminist resistance. From this reading, keeping femininity at a distance encapsulates the ambivalence that a radical feminist reappropriation would entertain: hence the film's own difficulty. However, the need to reconcile the strategic distance of the masquerade to the radical closeness of touch goes unresolved in Bruzzi's article. Her analysis is limiting in so far as it fails to read desire as the fantasmatic move that *hallucinates* an object's granting an original satisfaction. That is, the possibility for an object-cause of desire resides in a radical suspension of disbelief which, in *The Piano*, is deliberately complicated by the violation of the body of the woman.

In the episode of the play-within-the-film, as with Stewart's later severing of Ada's finger, the question of belief turns on a partially dismembered female body (the severed heads of Bluebeard's wives) as a reminder of the horror of a disjunction between representation and reality. Freud's account of the fetish as a substitute for the desired but absent maternal phallus (the fantasy that representation = reality, or that desire can be satisfied by an object imaged in the woman's body), and as a persistent memory of the terror of castration, depicts an oscillation which is clearly signposted in the play. We witness, for example, the preparation for the 'beheading' as a sanctioned visual pleasure precisely because it defers the real horror. Everything in the play signals that representation is not reality – 'and with the blood it will be a very good effect' – even as it attempts to appropriate that reality. When, during the play, the group of Maori men in the audience mistake representation for reality and attack 'Bluebeard', it becomes clear, as Linda Dyson also argues, that *The Piano* registers that a suspension of disbelief depends on a set of assumptions or white cultural codes that allow representation to be read as real without apparently violating any anterior 'reality'. Indeed, the effect of the play-within-the-film is to confer reality onto *The Piano*. In a sense,

then, the white colonial culture both relies upon and is tormented by the belief in an indistinction between representation and reality. This episode displaces that anxiety onto the misinterpretations of the Maoris, but the full force of that projection and displacement turns back on and affronts the spectator at the point where Stewart cuts off Ada's finger. Thus, Dyson's contention that the film's explicitly feminist address is partly to an elimination of postcolonial anxiety aligns that spectatorship first with the attempt to eliminate affect, and then with a process of regeneration and recuperation in the face of such a loss: the cutting off of Ada's finger, and the severed finger itself as visual horror, refuse the sanction of fiction. Whereas the play-within-the-film depicts a 'conscious' disavowal as spectacularly pleasurable, the scene of Ada's 'castration' affronts the cinematic spectator with what it might mean to be able to suspend disbelief when a series of signifiers solicit the very real effects of sexual violence.

Dyson's reading foregrounds the ambivalence of symbolization where Ada's 'severed finger sheathed in metal' becomes the potential 'symbol . . . of colonial lack'.²³ A prosthetic substitute and an actual bodily lack then ('visible' because invisible) come to symbolize the possibility for an identity which is only ever a symbolization of loss – 'the perceived "absent centre" of white identity'.²⁴ This tautology of lack literalizes the function of symbolization (symbolization as a gloss over lack). Indeed, for the metal finger, symbol of the woman's mutilated body, to symbolize a lack in identity would be to reiterate the process of symbolization with respect to sexual difference. But in missing the ambivalence through which the film works its critique of the traumatized woman of cinema, Dyson's reading fails to conceptualize the negativity that the film-as-replay unleashes. If *The Piano* literalizes the woman's castration, it does so simultaneously with an insistence on the trauma of male subjectivity, the impotency of which serves to conceal the violence of the colonial encounter. The feminist spectator, then, inasmuch as she is concerned with a 'positive' account of female sexuality, is situated in terms of a profound disaffection as the very condition for an identification that is invited at the same time as it is violently refused.

The film explicitly clues the spectator into an equation between Ada's voicelessness and the piano's 'speech', the piano standing in for her voice: 'I do not think myself silent, that is, because of my piano'. The woman's non-speech signals the paradoxical speech-less-ness and speech-ful-ness of the piano. The very fact that she does not speak privileges non-speech as a kind of musicality which, even as it references 'speech', refuses to 'speak' as such. Doubtless this paradoxical posture elicits a dominant feminist reading since it refers both to the woman's 'privileged' relation to a pre-linguistic semiotic, and to the difficulties of salvaging silenced women's voices from within linear historical/scientific discourses. This (con)textual moment

²³ Linda Dyson, 'The return of the repressed? Whiteness, femininity and colonialism in *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), p. 269.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

frames the filmic narrative with a compulsion and a refusal to speak – it is Ada's 'mind's voice' that organizes the spoken text and the filmic diegesis. A certain indistinction between voice and silence, speech and non-speech, both guarantees and disappoints a feminist spectatorship that struggles in the attempt to define the woman's empowerment in the very instant of her disempowerment, and fails to account for the extent of the latter.

In the opening scene of the film where Ada sits at the piano and begins to play, the shadow of a woman moves towards her behind a screen. The woman appears at the doorway and looks at Ada playing. The woman's look arrests Ada's playing and Ada returns the look accusingly. This defiant look propels the narrative of the film. A privileged entry into Ada's consciousness is facilitated via a fetishization of her curls in extreme closeup, and the deliberate equation of her 'mind's voice' with the piano's music. Hence an objectification and a narrative paradox affront the female spectator with what it might mean to identify with a subject that refuses as it solicits identification. In other words, the spectator position is commensurate in the film with a refusal to refuse and a refusal to comply. Therefore, the subject can only be apprehended as that instant in which the female spectator entertains the possibility of her own desubjectivation.

The most exciting thing about *The Piano* is that it, like the feminist spectator it solicits, courts the possible dissolution of its own critical enterprise – it discloses the economy of disavowal (and so on) on which the film work relies – as the very condition of its critique. The film specifies this difficulty as a problem for spectatorship by setting out key moments of identification at the very limits of the spectator's belief. In *The Piano*, identification sets the limits on what the spectator can be asked to believe, but, nonetheless, that belief is absolutely fundamental, and identification is solicited. Belief, then, incurs the spectator's wilful self-deceit: a kind of masochism. Thus, *The Piano* evidences a fundamentally masochistic form of looking which is constituted not just in the certification, through painful undermining, of the spectating subject, as I have argued, but, rather, in the *fantasy* of a series of objects in which that spectator must compulsively believe.

The seductions of masochism are clearly produced in *The Piano* as a set of 'imaginary narratives' around the figure of the woman which inevitably fail. The episode in which Morag inquires about the history of Ada's muteness, and Flora provides an account of a thunderstorm in the Pyrenees which struck her father dead and Ada dumb, dramatizes the pleasure which this failure constitutes for the female spectator. Here, it is a question of Ada's guilty sexuality (something that gets erased in accounts of her 'sexual awakening')²⁵ that transposes the question of narrative knowledge into the pleasures of female spectatorship, where those pleasures are granted by virtue of

²⁵ Ibid., p. 268.

²⁶ Bruzzi, 'Tempestuous petticoats', p. 265; Dyson, 'The return of the repressed?', p. 268.

the hyperbole and melodrama of the narrative (that is, the more unbelievable the more believed).

In this episode, the film is demanding that its spectators *see* representation in one moment, but that they misread it the next. (This is also precisely what happens in the scenes of the play-within-the-film.) I am drawing an equation between the female spectator and Morag here in so far as both insist on the cause of Ada's muteness as knowable. Consider, for example, Bruzzi's 'she simply decided to', Dyson's 'elective mute',²⁶ and Gillett's fictional reworking of Ada's voice. Freud's concept of negation suggests that a thought can be 'known' precisely because it is thoroughly unentertainable, unutterable. In these critical reconstructions of the origins of Ada's muteness as resistance, as well as Morag's/Flora's fantasy of trauma, the category of belief glosses over the threat of such a void at the very moment the spectator is being asked to deconstruct that gloss. Part of the pleasure for the female spectator, therefore, is constituted in the compulsion to suspend disbelief when she knows what is at stake. However, the film iterates the dangers for cinematic and pleasurable identifications, but gets trapped (it supplies Ada's 'mind's voice'), like Bruzzi, Dyson and Gillett, in replaying its own questions, thereby closing down the ambivalence with which they are raised.

The Piano's compulsion for its feminist audiences also derives, however, from its reappraisal of the extent and dominance of male power. Indeed, there is in the film little or no choice between masochism and masculinity. Through Stewart, the film deliberately associates the prototypical masculine voyeur, the cinematic spectator, and a masochistic constituent of the look. Stewart's masculinity and patriarchal authority have been in question from the very start. 'Old dry balls', implicitly impotent and infertile, his failing patriarchal power (the ability to exercise imperial power over the Maoris, to solicit the homosocial look) resonates with the failure of sexual potency. Certainly Stewart is repeatedly situated in key voyeuristic or fetishistic positions – such as watching Ada and Flora play, later Ada and Baines making love – which underscore that difficulty. But, in all of these scenarios, the masochistic masculine position – a compulsion for the displeasure that his viewing sustains – traces a process of projection that fixates the woman as symptom and sign of the difficulties and failure of that male subject. The film retraces a fantasmatic territory, then, that ultimately conflates castration and rape.

In what looks disturbingly like an assimilation of the classic masculine fear of female sexuality, it is made clear that Ada's 'active' sexuality in fact secures her death warrant. The possibility for Ada's celebrated heroism is therefore constantly thwarted by Stewart's and Baines's physical, sexual and economic violations: that is, both by a dramatization of the violence of sexual difference (Ada's 'castration') with the male subject its social agent; and, more importantly, the guarantee of sociality (Ada's acculturation in Nelson) via that

explicitly phallogocentric severing. Thus Ada's training for, but persistent failure to fulfil, the symbolic regimen, perfectly replays both the male subject's trajectory through projection/fetishization (Freud), and the phallic organization of sexual difference (Lacan), thereby producing a 'resistance' that is clearly both crucial and sadly inadequate to feminist demand. In every sense, there is a symptomatic doubling of masochistic affect in the role of the woman in the film and of the female spectator. To put this slightly differently, even though the film resists a naive repetition of sexual and sexually differentiated violence, even though it deliberately repeats in order to *displace* the violence it necessarily depicts, the category of repetition itself generates a violence that 'The Piano debate' has failed to call into account. Indeed, *The Piano* reveals an impasse in which the very process of sexual difference (social, cinematic and so on) is continually being reactivated at the moment of its conceptual undoing. This impasse also reveals quite acutely the importance of the negativity entertained by my account of auto-erotism as the possibility for a self-effacing, yet self-contained, subject.

The title of this article, 'I clipped your wing, that's all' refers to the scene in the film when, after he has 'castrated' Ada and she lies comatose in her bed, Stewart moves to rape her for the second time. In this scene it is Ada's look that disables the potential rapist. It is the very inevitability attached to the 'that's all' which provides the figure of a bodily violation for a regime of sexual difference, as well as the potential subversion of such a sadomasochistic sociality. It is precisely at this point, through this dialectic of inevitability and resistance, that the work of *The Piano* intervenes. *The Piano's* narrative replay registers its continual recuperation by the phallogocentric frame it is in the process of displacing.

The scene of Ada's 'castration' and Stewart's first attempted rape of her are visually cued into one another: in the first, Ada clings to underskirts hung on washing lines to prevent Stewart from dragging her to her fate; in the latter, Stewart clings to Ada's skirts in order to drag her towards him. In both scenes, masculine sadism and feminine victimhood are apparently intact. It is however, the *inevitability* of the woman's submission, hence the staging of a feminine masochistic position that 'disputes the . . . desirability of the active, masculine position'.²⁷ Ada's inevitable submission to the blow of the axe is signalled by her muddled and resolute face which looks elsewhere, which, in the face of extreme violence, defies and refuses to acknowledge the sadistic male. Indeed, her defiance refuses to restore the phallus to Stewart. He is reduced to idle, even hysterical, threats – 'I'll take off another, and another, and another!' – and useless phallic replacements, like the gun with which he threatens Baines – 'you're not even afraid of me'. This analysis clearly posits the woman's only potential empowerment in the very instance of her disempowerment *in extremis*. Ada, indeed, 'opts out' of suicide: 'What a death! What a

²⁷ Kaja Silverman, 'Masochism and subjectivity', *Framework*, no. 12 (1980), p. 6.

chance! What a surprise! My will has chosen life!'. The scene of Ada's death in effect *refuses death even as it stages it*, thereby making a 'taboo identification' with masochism, rendering speakable that taboo, and soliciting a possession of that masochistic voice – 'It is a weird lullaby, and so it is; it is mine'.²⁸

Both Ada's sexual pleasure in her objectification, that might so easily slip from fetishistic collaboration to actual bodily violation, and the female spectator's feminist evaluation and pleasure in Ada's recalcitrance, trace a liminal zone that is not contained by the vicissitudes of identification but, instead, by the 'enabling disablement' of the auto-erotic. Quite simply, the auto-sensuous field can, since it precedes the aggression and narcissism of identification, but also because it does not forego the relation to an object, imagine the dissolution of the subject before its subjective boundaries are even erected. To put this differently, through my reading of auto-erotism, the concept of a masochistic will or desire moves quite distinctly away from Ada's 'choice' between annihilation and subjectivation, away from the deathliness that bespeaks its resistance: 'I have to go . . . let me go', and, finally, allows us to contemplate the dangers of unconscious desires without admitting that negativity into, or confusing it with, conscious volition. This reading directs us, therefore, into a tautology of lack, 'the silence where no sound hath been', that quite literally holds in suspense the will that is for death.

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reports

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Memory is map and gyroscope. It has the power to locate and secure personal identity yet is sensitive and flexible enough to admit challenge and change. So memory shapes subjectivity in a varied complexity. Yet it is also partial and fragmentary, hence unreliable; in this it is no different from other forms of representation with neither more nor less authority.

Memory is also collective and social, the complex of histories recorded and sensed, official and alternative. Like personal memory, this public memory is also powerful, flexible, varied and just as partial. So history as the past is also contradictory, contested and in hierarchies of dominance.

The same of course goes for History – that is, the organization of approaches to understanding the past. Since the History attested by the National Curriculum and the History of professional historians have become openly disputed in tabloid journalism, the authority of history and History has been popularly undermined. History was also an early casualty in postmodernist accounts of epistemological breakdown among the academic professions. Furthermore, ranged against any number of counter histories such as labour, class, diasporas or feminisms, the political nature of the contests between official histories, disputed histories, marginalized histories, neglected histories and even histories still yet to be documented increases disputes over the past and methods of representation of the past.

The notion of cultural memory functions to bring together these three senses of personal, public and disciplinary access to the past. What is new about the alignment is the lack of hierarchy in the relationship. If, in Arthur

Marwick's telling phrase, a culture without history is like a mind without memory (Marwick, *The Nature of History* [London: Macmillan, 1970]), the notion of cultural memory invokes another: a history of collectives without biography is like a culture without subjectivity. Cultural memory connects the terms in these relations in new ways, yet without losing the sense of distinctions between them: public record and private echo, Major and miner, the past and intellectual enquiry into the past.

The subject of this timely conference was to explore such connections and distinctions within cultural memory as a site of this complex of cultural production and reproduction. In the contemporary politics of higher education, where conditions for intellectual labour are pressured by work-disciplines imposed by central and institutional policies and practices, the quality of papers was to the credit of authors, attesting to the continuing vibrancy of work in the various contemporary manifestations of cultural studies. Moreover, in the delivery of papers there was little evidence of the intellectual competition, byproducts of pressures on research and careers, that so marred many academic conferences of the 1980s. The popularity of Americanized conference models seems to be on the wane too. This conference had none of that aggressive speed-delivery of papers too long for their allotted time. All of this was thankfully absent and absented. Instead, there was a comradely flexibility in the delivery and discussion of papers, encouraged by arrangements for interactive panels of speakers, and the availability of full time for them and their audiences to exchange. The conference was a model of intellectual pedagogy and enabling, firm-but-informal organization. For once, the final vote of thanks to the organizers was more than justly earned.

The conference was organized thematically. 'Violence and Remembering' – featuring Renata Salecl, Tony Kushner and Sylvie

Lindeperg – was especially productive in addressing the Holocaust, and that strange epithet ‘industry’, for subsequent campaigns of remembering. ‘Forgetting’ included French academics Anne Simonin and Brigitte Gaiti, the latter reviewing a national reconstruction of a 1961 Paris race demonstration whose public record served convenient power interests in the present politics of France. James Fentress and Anna Vidali contributed to ‘Memory, History and Cultural Transmission’, and, also in this session, Sally Alexander examined generational links between motherhood and sexual knowledge in a paper entitled ‘We think back through our mothers’.

In ‘Colonial Memories and Postcolonial Desires’, Liz Gunner reflected on the use of praise poetry in South African struggles before and after apartheid. Mamadou Diouf’s evocative phrase, ‘you don’t have a past unless you’re talking about the present’, emerged from an account of religious identities and colonial assimilation.

A screening of her film, *Disgraced Monuments*, introduced by Laura Mulvey, connected especially to a provocative session, ‘Archaeological Memories’, notable for Julian Thomas’s interrogation of theory and archaeology (‘narrative is part of the way in which self is constructed’) and Mike Rowlands on war memorials (‘in history, artefacts have no absolute substance’). Finally, there was ‘Narratives of the Self’, with visual arts issues addressed in papers by David Vilaseca and Susan Taylor.

As it unwound over a Friday night and two weekend days, surprising convergences of interest began to emerge from debates within disciplines and among interdisciplinary approaches about this past and its presence in the present. Two related issues were, for me, the most compelling to review and, not too coincidentally, are the most likely to interest readers of *Screen*.

The first issue emerged from the proposition that as memory is cultural and natural, shared and individual, cultural memory is a form of

representation. As such, the arousing idea of memory as text took shape, with the task of identifying the textual properties of memory. Sceptically reviewing the obvious connections with the nature and functions of dreams within psychoanalytic theory, Nicola King in the session on ‘Forgetting’ wanted to investigate memory ‘as a text to be deciphered’. In a paper on ‘Autobiography as cultural memory’, she discerned patterns of similarity in the otherwise random, incoherent or distorted recollections of autobiographical accounts by Carolyn Steedman, Ronald Fraser and Georges Perec. Though skilfully constructing memory as an object of study, she was less assured about defining memory as text, and recognized the difficulty of framing approaches to overcome problems of access at both personal and cultural levels. In noting how ‘we may never know what we didn’t know then’, she prompted careful consideration of the constitution, status and purpose of memory.

Annette Kuhn developed the issue in a brilliant conclusion to the conference by locating cultural memory first as a process, an attempt to ‘make use of memory to inform our futures’. Developing the idea of memory as text, Kuhn sought to argue the ‘locatable textual features’ of memory. She noted how ‘memory shapes inner worlds in a desire to command through fantasies of power and disavowal of loss’. Memory, she argued, is ‘a language of images’ actively producing discursive meanings with a sensibility (‘what memory feels like’) and its own formal conventions. These conventions she saw characterized by a distinctive organization of time (not sequential, not tensed, fragmented, musical) demonstrated in a section from Terence Davies’s film *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988). Importantly, she offered ‘memory texts’ as a counter to the ‘fictions of modernity’, refusing unity in fragmentation, yet voicing a collective imagination in ‘echoes of oral history’.

What I understood and valued as a certain romance of opposition in this line of argument

was also evident in the second and related issue developing through the conference. Although much was revealed in thinking of memory as cultural text, what did it mean to think of memory as cultural history, of memory as no more the past than history, but as a figure in contesting discourses of remembering? Memory of History, one of many Ways of Remembering; much debate was triggered by the idea. Also at stake here was how memory had figured, and could figure, among ways of remembering in more sanctioned histories of disciplinary procedures, approaches and traditions. And so it was that in many papers on this topic, occasionally explicitly but more often implicitly, particular disciplines became subject to critical revision as their legacy of approaches to memory were newly scrutinized.

Such revisionism was evident in papers which were often multi-disciplinary, but had a bearing on film studies. I admired in particular a paper by Anton Kaes, who analysed the impact of the Great War on Weimar Cinema in a session entitled 'Media and Memory', to which Peter Hoff and Bryan Cheyette also contributed. In place of Kracauer's more familiar judgement of this film expressionism as prefiguring the rise of German fascism (see Kracauer, *From Caligary to Hitler* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947]), Kaes placed the films in the context of cultural memory. In particular, he demonstrated how *Nosferatu* (F. W. Murnau, 1921) could be understood as a war narrative, remembering the fear of going to and returning from war, 'the dead returning to haunt the living', as a key feature of postwar Germany and a cultural condition for ideologies of rebirth in the interwar period. No counter-history here, just a careful historical precision, returning the film texts to the historical conjunction in which they were produced, revising the generalizing tendencies of a kind of 'hindsight history' that emerged as the critical tradition of writing on German film expressionism.

Similar revisionism was evident elsewhere.

For instance, in 'Colonial Memories and Post-Colonial Desires', Imruh Bakari gently delivered a tough paper on the 'imperfect cinema' of the Caribbean, represented in the Hollywood melodrama, *Island in the Sun* (Robert Rossen, 1957), as colonialism's 'real estate of miscegenation', in *Rue Cases Nègres* (Euzhan Palcy, 1983) as 'part of the unconscious of cultural memory' and in 'the migration narrative' of *The Harder They Come* (Perry Hensell, 1972) as 'canonizing resistance as a national hero'. Important empirical revelations about conditions of film production and reception in the Caribbean emerged through these textual readings. They functioned, too, as critique of Anglocentric and ahistorical tendencies in the textual and modernist traditions alike of British film studies. Bakari's intellectual commitment to a place for the subjective in cultural analysis was part of a developing debt film studies owes to cultural studies. In particular, Bakari demonstrated the importance of exploring the function of films for their audiences who, despite little if any investment in their production, display much investment in their consumption. Or, as Jackie Stacey phrased it near the end of the conference, there is always an *excess* to the text, arising from 'differential investments, promises, futures' located in the complex identities of the subject of memory.

The abstracts of memory texts, described here in papers by Nicola King and Annette Kuhn, with the conjunctural analyses of others, like Imruh Bakari and Anton Kaes, combined to identify the value and extend the application of an emergent concept in intellectual enquiry about cultural texts and their histories. Together, however, they demonstrated significant interventions into the politics and pedagogy of the academy in these postmodern, post-Cold War, post-socialist days. The news that many of the conference papers will be published in a future issue of *New Formations* is welcomed.

Among those memories that remain with me long after the event, I will recall continuing

evidence of a necessary sensitivity to the social and psychic position of common reading and readers in cultural analysis; the demonstrable responsibility of intellectual enquiry to committed but flexible social alignments; the almost universal turn from the hubris of unapplied metatheory to the modesty of critical studies in empirical context; and the joy of a film studies increasingly turning from the inert generalizings of modernist film criticism, the qualities of traditions of textual analysis merging productively with the contextual precisions that come from methods of conjunctural analysis in cultural studies.

A conference to remember.

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One seldom learns very much from the papers at academic conferences. This is not for the most part for any want of scholarly quality – most papers are well researched, much thought about, on interesting topics, and the result of evident commitment. It is rather the culture of conferences. Hardly anyone seems to treat them as teaching and learning occasions (at least, for the sake of the students of most participants, I hope this is true).

I do not think this is a necessary product of the convention of having three twenty-minute papers per session. This in fact has much to commend it: it allows more voices to be heard, permits a wider spread of subjects, and sometimes facilitates a bringing together of different angles on the same issue, or the making of connections between apparently less related topics; twenty minutes is also about the maximum length for which anyone can pay attention to even a well-given talk. It is what is done in and with the allotted time that is in practice the real problem. First, people tend to *read* papers rather than deliver them. I appreciate that some people lack the

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in the opening plenary with Petra Küppers, Chantal Nadeau and Anne Marie Stock), and of course I may have struck unlucky much of the time (one cannot go to everything), but the clarity and pacing of Gorbman and Tagg set a standard of professionalism that was not really matched (and I do not speak here only of nervous, first-time conference speakers with little or no teaching experience). To compound the problem, the central theoretical and methodological issues they raised in relation to one of the conference's themes, film/television/video and music, tended to be notable elsewhere for their absence. (I deliberately concentrated my attendance on this theme, rather than the other strand on performance; the two overlapped a lot of course.) One cannot perhaps blame speakers for not having already had the benefit of Gorbman's lucid delineation of different ways of conceptualizing, inter alia, the relations between music in and without film, the different dominant practices of music in film ('dramatic underscoring') and television ('hailing the viewer'), or the interconnections of both sound and film technology and film form. However, Tagg's account of the besetting sins of musical analysis proved all too transferable to the music in film/television/video analysis on offer.

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Richard Dyer

International Association for the Study of Popular Music VII International Conference, Glasgow, 1–6 July 1995

Looking back at my rather battered programme for six packed days in July 1995, there are signs of the diversity, friendliness and hopeful chaos of the conference. Notes to myself to provide alarm clocks for overseas friends who needed to be woken for early flights, last minute programme and room changes, doodles and exclamation marks are scribbled in the margins and over abstracts. As I remember it, the conference atmosphere, like the weather, was warm, and there was a pleasant sense in which you felt that people had attended because they were truly

interested in a subject which was often outside their own discipline and which is still full of contradictions, challenges and good humoured provocation.

This was only my second IASPM conference, and the first, I think, to be so closely associated with another international affair: *Screen's* own annual conference, which this year obligingly focused on issues of performance and music. Consequently, the first day of the IASPM conference overlapped with the last day of *Screen's*, but the potential dominance of the visual was neatly avoided by an authoritative start by the keynote speakers, Claudia Gorbman and Philip Tagg. Gorbman compellingly outlined the materiality of music as part of the cinematic experience, and Tagg demonstrated that popular music needs, perhaps, to rein in some of its creative chaos to enable colleagues to speak – if not in one voice, at least to each other – in ways that develop rather than undermine each other's methodologies. Later in the morning, a session concentrating on the reception of video and MTV in different geographical and political contexts – particularly Lida Hujic's paper on the reception of MTV in Bosnia – suggested that situation as well as conversation is also important for the fullest understanding of how popular music makes meaning. In the afternoon, the nostalgia deconstructed by a session examining how popular music is used in television drama was rapidly superseded by the last session of the day. Here, I am afraid, the pleasures of visual, and contemporary, hysteria did begin to usurp the musical focus and critical detachment, as an ethnography of 'Take That' fans allowed some members of the audience (principally, me) to indulge in observations that were parochial, and perhaps not strictly academic.

Suitably chastised by a punitive hangover on the Monday (a party at King Tut's Wah Wah Hut may have had something to do with this), I was more sensible as the critical heavyweights of British popular music studies, Paul Oliver and Richard Middleton, delivered

papers that demonstrated the critical breadth and historical depth of the subject.

Middleton's paper used repetition as a central theme around which he presented a wide range of cultural theory, from Kant to Adorno, as well as Bakhtin and Kristeva. Using this theoretical armoury, it seemed to me (in a crude revision) that he was suggesting a critical movement which was sensitive to time, both within history and as an intrinsic part of popular music, might be one way to unearth this music's wider-reaching implications within social life (a thesis taken up and developed by Georgie Born in the closing plenary). In contrast to this, Oliver's paper concentrated on the historical, and presented a fascinating case-study concerning the reliability of recordings as the proper material of study. As an example, he demonstrated that early recordings of some blues music were not in fact effective renderings of the actual 'event' of the music as it had been experienced by the original audience.

Significantly, his paper demonstrated that a contemporary concern with the tangibility of the authentic 'critical object' has a resonance that stretches back, as well as forward, into the debates surrounding the development of digital technology, and the virtual phenomenology of the rave. These concerns were neatly elaborated by Sarah Thornton, later in the day, as she provided a historical account of the range of competing authenticities that surround the gig, different recordings and 'events' supported by recorded music, and their varying significance for different audiences.

Tuesday promised a day of 'Performing Policy and Practice', and revealed itself it to be, unsurprisingly, a day in which politics came to the fore. Jan Fairley's keynote speech demonstrated through an examination of the performances of a Chilean group (Inti-Illumani) how politics *in* performance for a local audience can become transformed into the performance *of* politics for an international audience, as the hierarchies of stardom and the monolingual ignorance of an overwhelmingly

western audience distort meanings in the music. Ironically, perhaps, the conference then presented an opening plenary focusing exclusively on British and Irish music, and national identities. Allowances might be made, however, as Mark Percival's paper on a local music show was perhaps the only paper in the conference to focus exclusively on the Scottish music scene. Martin Cloonan's paper on 'English-ness' was also defiantly parochial, but demonstrated nevertheless the diversity and contradictions which are sometimes overlooked in the rush to secure a coherent heritage for the current wave of Britpop.

Later in the day, there was an unfortunate programme alteration which meant that one interesting session, shared by Connie Atkinson and Christopher Jackman who both presented papers looking at the arrangement and interaction of audiences for music in New Orleans, was separated from its original line-up with Wendy Fonarow's paper on the various positions of different audience members at indie gigs. Rather disappointingly, these papers' respective audiences became overly significant, with the New Orleans duo effectively being marginalized (I think there were three of us present) while Fonarow's paper, paired with Patria Velazquez's discussion of Salsa clubs in London, was much better attended. This was a shame, as I think Atkinson's paper, in particular, would have provided an effective counterpart to Fonarow's. It might have allowed the audience to engage critically with some of the issues raised, and with the limitations of the paper itself, rather than simply reminiscing nostalgically about the days in which they were part of the 'mosh pit' and not skulking at the back near the toilets and A&R personnel.

Wednesday, however, demonstrated the impact of personal recollection on critical reflection. With the absence of Bob Last who was to have been the keynote speaker, the day began with a session involving popular music journalists, including Simon Frith (wearing his non-academic hat), Lucy O'Brien and David

Sinclair. This was a lively and increasingly parochial session, which one German participant neatly punctured by enquiring 'Who is the enemy?' (referring, of course, as all the British participants guiltily realized, to the 'NME' – the *New Musical Express*.) Such interventions were not, however, enough to prevent one enraged delegate from accusing Lucy O'Brien of 'clambering over musicians' corpses' in her career (a rather extravagant claim which she took with surprising tolerance.) This kind of dialogue, while entertaining for the rest of us, demonstrates the dangers as well as the benefits of attempting to gain a critical detachment on your own career, and reveals the real pleasures, pains and emotions involved in the study of culture. The conference entered calmer waters later in the day with a standout performance of the possibilities of new technologies by Helmi Jarviluoma, and a seductive paper on the internet activities of the Petshop Boys by Andrew Goodwin. The effect of new technologies on the music was taken up in the last session of the day with a paper by Jason Toynbee demonstrating how the use of, and occasional resistance to, new technologies is determined by the kind of music that is being produced. The day ended with the well-intentioned but interminable discussions of a General Meeting, set up to confirm and elect new members to the board of IASPM. With so many articulate and politicized members, as well as some non-Anglo-US delegates expressing justifiable grievances, the meeting rapidly became unwieldy and exhausting.

Unfortunately, I think this subdued many of the delegates, and a significant number had either retreated home or had decided to shop during the last day of the conference. (Glasgow's many attractions were, I know, much appreciated.) This meant that they missed a series of responses which (rather neatly) provided some answers to the concerns and issues that had been raised by the keynote papers way back on Sunday morning. Both

Allan Moore's keynote speech and Alf Bjornberg's plenary paper reintroduced the music to the popular music text, and reminded the audience that the music was at different times, and in different communities, more than simply the 'haunting back side' to words. Johan Fornas's paper presented alongside Bjornberg's provided a suitable counterpoint to this, as he demonstrated how 'words' could also act like music, or were, at least, not necessarily opposed. He then delighted the audience by using as his example a track which had Rodney King rapping with (or against?) George Bush.

Different voices were raised in the afternoon: Kate Augestad's paper concerning the 'grain of the voice' tested listeners as to whether they could distinguish the 'star quality' of a singer, even if the singer was both unknown to them and singing in Norwegian. (Answer: about two-thirds.) The voice was also a source of pleasure in Bob Bowman's paper, where he contrasted the contemporary merriment produced by Bing Crosby's rendition of 'Try a little tenderness' with the pleasure produced by the Otis Redding version, allowing him to raise, yet again, the question of the 'authentic object' — had Redding in fact written a new song, or was it enough to point to the significance of rearrangement and performance? These issues were then developed by an accompanying paper presented by Jason Oakes, who described a bizarre periphery of music production where tribute bands such as Soft Parade (aka The Doors) or Power Windows (aka Rush) see themselves, and are seen by their audience, as producing more than

'covers'; the question, then, which Oakes attempted to answer, is what is it they *are* producing: a new authenticity, or a convincing archetype? Inconclusive, but definitely stimulating.

The same could, perhaps, also be said of the closing plenary given by Georgie Born. A mammoth task, in which she attempted to bring together six days of diverse debate and to suggest some thoughts of her own, Born's presentation was hampered by the fact that many delegates did indeed have to get that last train home, and her contribution did not really receive the discussion it deserved. Picking up on the concept of time previously raised by Richard Middleton, Born attempted to bring various speakers' contributions together by outlining how a multi-perspectival approach might be worked through a critical framework which would acknowledge music as both multi- and inter-textual, and which could use time as the overarching critical metaphor. With this, I think she was suggesting a way in which the much needed link between sociology/anthropology and musicology might be established. Whether or not such an approach is taken up, it was nevertheless indicative of the ambitions and diversity of popular music studies more generally. As for my feelings, even if I don't make it to the next international conference (in Japan) Glasgow consolidated my interest in, and continued to establish the importance of, the study of popular music, which is, literally, (rockin') all over the world.

Karen Lury

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International Association for the Study of Popular Music VII International Conference, Glasgow, 1–6 July 1995

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in the opening plenary with Petra Küppers, Chantal Nadeau and Anne Marie Stock), and of course I may have struck unlucky much of the time (one cannot go to everything), but the clarity and pacing of Gorbman and Tagg set a standard of professionalism that was not really matched (and I do not speak here only of nervous, first-time conference speakers with little or no teaching experience). To compound the problem, the central theoretical and methodological issues they raised in relation to one of the conference's themes, film/television/video and music, tended to be notable elsewhere for their absence. (I deliberately concentrated my attendance on this theme, rather than the other strand on performance; the two overlapped a lot of course.) One cannot perhaps blame speakers for not having already had the benefit of Gorbman's lucid delineation of different ways of conceptualizing, inter alia, the relations between music in and without film, the different dominant practices of music in film ('dramatic underscoring') and television ('hailing the viewer'), or the interconnections of both sound and film technology and film form. However, Tagg's account of the besetting sins of musical analysis proved all too transferable to the music in film/television/video analysis on offer.

What marked Gorbman's and Tagg's papers most strongly was that they did talk about music as music. Tagg, in particular, stressed the importance of this, and of not being cowed by an ignorance of notation, nor embarrassed by talking of the twiddly-diddly-dee bits. However difficult it is to do, and however far short it falls of its object, it is possible to describe music in non-specialist language and only by doing so do we get anywhere near its feelings and the reasons why it compels us so. Few papers at the conference seemed even to realize that this was an issue. Thus treatments of singers, for instance, seemed not to come to grips with the particular sound qualities of the voice or what the singers actually did with songs. This was only made worse by – I hate

to say it – the primacy of the ideological concerns that still fuel work in the field. So many papers wanted to deal with the ideological implications of a particular performer or kind of music as used in film, television or video, and this interests me too, but if we don't understand how music works as music, we can be absolutely sure we shall not understand how it works ideologically. It is how music makes us feel, through the specifics of the vocal timbre, the instrumental colour, the rhythmic play, that is important to us, and it is the ideology of those feelings that we need to think about (rather than treating ideology as something essentially produced elsewhere and merely somehow carried by the music).

Any conference that allows one to contemplate CanDoCo, *The Crow*, Lena Horne, Whitney Houston, Gene Kelly, Cliff Richard, *Rigoletto* and Take That (others would draw up other lists) cannot be all bad, but the little stabs of pleasure that one got from them only reminded one of how far we still are from knowing how to talk about what that pleasure is like and why it matters.

Richard Dyer

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Looking back at my rather battered programme for six packed days in July 1995, there are signs of the diversity, friendliness and hopeful chaos of the conference. Notes to myself to provide alarm clocks for overseas friends who needed to be woken for early flights, last minute programme and room changes, doodles and exclamation marks are scribbled in the margins and over abstracts. As I remember it, the conference atmosphere, like the weather, was warm, and there was a pleasant sense in which you felt that people had attended because they were truly

interested in a subject which was often outside their own discipline and which is still full of contradictions, challenges and good humoured provocation.

This was only my second IASPM conference, and the first, I think, to be so closely associated with another international affair: *Screen's* own annual conference, which this year obligingly focused on issues of performance and music. Consequently, the first day of the IASPM conference overlapped with the last day of *Screen's*, but the potential dominance of the visual was neatly avoided by an authoritative start by the keynote speakers, Claudia Gorbman and Philip Tagg. Gorbman compellingly outlined the materiality of music as part of the cinematic experience, and Tagg demonstrated that popular music needs, perhaps, to rein in some of its creative chaos to enable colleagues to speak – if not in one voice, at least to each other – in ways that develop rather than undermine each other's methodologies. Later in the morning, a session concentrating on the reception of video and MTV in different geographical and political contexts – particularly Lida Hujic's paper on the reception of MTV in Bosnia – suggested that situation as well as conversation is also important for the fullest understanding of how popular music makes meaning. In the afternoon, the nostalgia deconstructed by a session examining how popular music is used in television drama was rapidly superseded by the last session of the day. Here, I am afraid, the pleasures of visual, and contemporary, hysteria did begin to usurp the musical focus and critical detachment, as an ethnography of 'Take That' fans allowed some members of the audience (principally, me) to indulge in observations that were parochial, and perhaps not strictly academic.

Suitably chastised by a punitive hangover on the Monday (a party at King Tut's Wah Wah Hut may have had something to do with this), I was more sensible as the critical heavyweights of British popular music studies, Paul Oliver and Richard Middleton, delivered

papers that demonstrated the critical breadth and historical depth of the subject.

Middleton's paper used repetition as a central theme around which he presented a wide range of cultural theory, from Kant to Adorno, as well as Bakhtin and Kristeva. Using this theoretical armoury, it seemed to me (in a crude revision) that he was suggesting a critical movement which was sensitive to time, both within history and as an intrinsic part of popular music, might be one way to unearth this music's wider-reaching implications within social life (a thesis taken up and developed by Georgie Born in the closing plenary). In contrast to this, Oliver's paper concentrated on the historical, and presented a fascinating case-study concerning the reliability of recordings as the proper material of study. As an example, he demonstrated that early recordings of some blues music were not in fact effective renderings of the actual 'event' of the music as it had been experienced by the original audience.

Significantly, his paper demonstrated that a contemporary concern with the tangibility of the authentic 'critical object' has a resonance that stretches back, as well as forward, into the debates surrounding the development of digital technology, and the virtual phenomenology of the rave. These concerns were neatly elaborated by Sarah Thornton, later in the day, as she provided a historical account of the range of competing authenticities that surround the gig, different recordings and 'events' supported by recorded music, and their varying significance for different audiences.

Tuesday promised a day of 'Performing Policy and Practice', and revealed itself it to be, unsurprisingly, a day in which politics came to the fore. Jan Fairley's keynote speech demonstrated through an examination of the performances of a Chilean group (Inti-Illumani) how politics *in* performance for a local audience can become transformed into the performance *of* politics for an international audience, as the hierarchies of stardom and the monolingual ignorance of an overwhelmingly

western audience distort meanings in the music. Ironically, perhaps, the conference then presented an opening plenary focusing exclusively on British and Irish music, and national identities. Allowances might be made, however, as Mark Percival's paper on a local music show was perhaps the only paper in the conference to focus exclusively on the Scottish music scene. Martin Cloonan's paper on 'English-ness' was also defiantly parochial, but demonstrated nevertheless the diversity and contradictions which are sometimes overlooked in the rush to secure a coherent heritage for the current wave of Britpop.

Later in the day, there was an unfortunate programme alteration which meant that one interesting session, shared by Connie Atkinson and Christopher Jackman who both presented papers looking at the arrangement and interaction of audiences for music in New Orleans, was separated from its original line-up with Wendy Fonarow's paper on the various positions of different audience members at indie gigs. Rather disappointingly, these papers' respective audiences became overly significant, with the New Orleans duo effectively being marginalized (I think there were three of us present) while Fonarow's paper, paired with Patria Velazquez's discussion of Salsa clubs in London, was much better attended. This was a shame, as I think Atkinson's paper, in particular, would have provided an effective counterpart to Fonarow's. It might have allowed the audience to engage critically with some of the issues raised, and with the limitations of the paper itself, rather than simply reminiscing nostalgically about the days in which they were part of the 'mosh pit' and not skulking at the back near the toilets and A&R personnel.

Wednesday, however, demonstrated the impact of personal recollection on critical reflection. With the absence of Bob Last who was to have been the keynote speaker, the day began with a session involving popular music journalists, including Simon Frith (wearing his non-academic hat), Lucy O'Brien and David

Sinclair. This was a lively and increasingly parochial session, which one German participant neatly punctured by enquiring 'Who is the enemy?' (referring, of course, as all the British participants guiltily realized, to the 'NME' – the *New Musical Express*.) Such interventions were not, however, enough to prevent one enraged delegate from accusing Lucy O'Brien of 'clambering over musicians' corpses' in her career (a rather extravagant claim which she took with surprising tolerance.) This kind of dialogue, while entertaining for the rest of us, demonstrates the dangers as well as the benefits of attempting to gain a critical detachment on your own career, and reveals the real pleasures, pains and emotions involved in the study of culture. The conference entered calmer waters later in the day with a standout performance of the possibilities of new technologies by Helmi Jarviluoma, and a seductive paper on the internet activities of the Petshop Boys by Andrew Goodwin. The effect of new technologies on the music was taken up in the last session of the day with a paper by Jason Toynbee demonstrating how the use of, and occasional resistance to, new technologies is determined by the kind of music that is being produced. The day ended with the well-intentioned but interminable discussions of a General Meeting, set up to confirm and elect new members to the board of IASPM. With so many articulate and politicized members, as well as some non-Anglo-US delegates expressing justifiable grievances, the meeting rapidly became unwieldy and exhausting.

Unfortunately, I think this subdued many of the delegates, and a significant number had either retreated home or had decided to shop during the last day of the conference. (Glasgow's many attractions were, I know, much appreciated.) This meant that they missed a series of responses which (rather neatly) provided some answers to the concerns and issues that had been raised by the keynote papers way back on Sunday morning. Both

Allan Moore's keynote speech and Alf Bjornberg's plenary paper reintroduced the music to the popular music text, and reminded the audience that the music was at different times, and in different communities, more than simply the 'haunting back side' to words. Johan Fornas's paper presented alongside Bjornberg's provided a suitable counterpoint to this, as he demonstrated how 'words' could also act like music, or were, at least, not necessarily opposed. He then delighted the audience by using as his example a track which had Rodney King rapping with (or against?) George Bush.

Different voices were raised in the afternoon: Kate Augestad's paper concerning the 'grain of the voice' tested listeners as to whether they could distinguish the 'star quality' of a singer, even if the singer was both unknown to them and singing in Norwegian. (Answer: about two-thirds.) The voice was also a source of pleasure in Bob Bowman's paper, where he contrasted the contemporary merriment produced by Bing Crosby's rendition of 'Try a little tenderness' with the pleasure produced by the Otis Redding version, allowing him to raise, yet again, the question of the 'authentic object' — had Redding in fact written a new song, or was it enough to point to the significance of rearrangement and performance? These issues were then developed by an accompanying paper presented by Jason Oakes, who described a bizarre periphery of music production where tribute bands such as Soft Parade (aka The Doors) or Power Windows (aka Rush) see themselves, and are seen by their audience, as producing more than

'covers'; the question, then, which Oakes attempted to answer, is what is it they *are* producing: a new authenticity, or a convincing archetype? Inconclusive, but definitely stimulating.

The same could, perhaps, also be said of the closing plenary given by Georgie Born. A mammoth task, in which she attempted to bring together six days of diverse debate and to suggest some thoughts of her own, Born's presentation was hampered by the fact that many delegates did indeed have to get that last train home, and her contribution did not really receive the discussion it deserved. Picking up on the concept of time previously raised by Richard Middleton, Born attempted to bring various speakers' contributions together by outlining how a multi-perspectival approach might be worked through a critical framework which would acknowledge music as both multi- and inter-textual, and which could use time as the overarching critical metaphor. With this, I think she was suggesting a way in which the much needed link between sociology/anthropology and musicology might be established. Whether or not such an approach is taken up, it was nevertheless indicative of the ambitions and diversity of popular music studies more generally. As for my feelings, even if I don't make it to the next international conference (in Japan) Glasgow consolidated my interest in, and continued to establish the importance of, the study of popular music, which is, literally, (rockin') all over the world.

Karen Lury

reviews

review article:

Vickie Lebeau, *Lost Angels: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 172 pp.

SUSANNAH RADSTONE

Lost Angels constitutes nothing less than a major revision of psychoanalytic film theory. Through readings of three popular 'youth' films of the 1980s – John Hughes's *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumble Fish* (1983) and Tim Hunter's *River's Edge* (1986) – Lebeau proffers an analysis of text–spectator relations that shuns the dominant cine-psychoanalytic concerns with Oedipus, voyeurism, fetishism and the like, in favour of a concern with the tantalizing fantasmatic lure of the primal (and perverse) father.

This theoretical 'regression' to a concern with the (pre-Oedipal) father counters, to an extent, feminism's and psychoanalysis's recent moves towards an exclusive foregrounding of the child's (and, in the case of feminism, the daughter's) relation with the pre-Oedipal mother. This foregrounding can tend towards a blaming of the (fantasmatic) mother for whatever pathologies a reading produces, together with a forgetting of the role of the primal (fantasmatic) father in the early psychic life of the child. *Lost Angels's* commitment to this rethinking of cine-psychoanalytic theory sits alongside the book's always ambiguous relation to psychoanalysis, which is deployed, here, both for and against itself. For Lebeau is at pains to point out that the lure of the archaic, narcissistic father permeates not just the films she analyses, but the theories she deploys. Thus, she argues, following M. Borch-Jacobsen, that Freud 'does not so much "analyze this totalitarian fantasy as subscribe to it"' (p. 112).¹ Borch-Jacobsen's reference to the totalitarian *fantasy* of the primal father brings us to

¹ Quoting M. Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. C. Porter (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 69.

this book's central concern with fantasy as the psychical medium through which the subject enters and becomes bound to the social. For although *Lost Angels* concerns itself with text-spectator relations, the relation it describes and analyses is that between the film text and its address to, and construction of, the *collective* or social subject. The brilliance of the book lies in its feminist analysis of the fantasy through which the social is secured – a fantasy that arguably rests on the exclusion or, at worst, the murder of 'woman'. This exclusion or annihilation of 'woman' emerges as paradoxical, since the collective subject constructed by cinema comes to be understood here as inextricably tied to a femininity it is then bound to repudiate.

Lebeau's analysis of the fantasmatic identifications through which the collective subject constructs itself works through Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, while acknowledging that text's arguable enthrallment by the primal father. In so doing, *Lost Angels* revises Lacanian cine-psychoanalysis's dominant deployment of identification in relation to the screen as mirror, within which the subject misrecognizes itself. Following Joan Copjec, Lebeau argues that what this approach misses is that, for Lacan, it is the mirror which '*assumes the function of a screen* not only because we inevitably disbelieve what we see but because that disbelief signals a suspicion – what is being concealed from me? – which turns visibility into a lure' (p. 41). A reprise of Lebeau's revisions of cine-psychoanalysis's dominant understandings of visibility, identification and fantasy cannot be attempted here, but the stress on visibility as *lure* is central to her understanding of the fantasmatic nature of the social bond as it is rehearsed by popular cinema in its construction of and address to a mass audience. For Lebeau, it is the *fantasy* of the primal father's love that keeps social ties alive. This fantasy emerges through a reading of *Totem and Taboo* that stresses both the narcissism of the primal father – the primal father's self-sufficiency – *and* the fraternal alliance that follows the father's murder. This alliance rests on:

[an] idealization of the symbolic substitute for the father – the totem – [which] represents both an act of obedience and what Freud calls an 'attempt at self-justification' expressed through the following formula: 'If our father had treated us in the way the totem does, we should never have felt tempted to kill him' (p. 76).

Through this murder, the brothers are bound into a guilty alliance forever ruled over by the (impossible) fantasy of a loving primal father: a fantasy of a perversely 'tantalizing' father whose omnipotence 'dazzles', screening his 'deadness' or incapacity to love. This dazzling screen becomes, for Lebeau, the analogue of the screen of mass cinema.

As Lebeau takes great pains to point out, although the cost to these brothers of entry into the symbolic is great, the cost to 'woman' of this construction of the social is greater, since the transition from

primal horde to civilization rests on ties between brothers and brothers, and sons and fathers: there is no place here for woman other than as an object of exchange within the alliance. Yet, Lebeau argues, as Freud's work on mass psychology and Adorno's analysis of the audience for mass entertainment cinema reveals, the social tie that yearns for the (impossible) love of the all-powerful father positions its subjects as feminine – and hence necessitates the constant *repudiation* of femininity through the debasement of woman.

Once established, Lebeau pursues this reading of the precarious and fantasmatic fraternal bond that constitutes the social through a series of cult 'youth' films which, she argues, stage or enact the bond in all its perverse fragility. These analyses point to the way these films struggle (and sometimes fail) to make the myth of a simultaneously loving and omnipotent Narcissus *work*. In so doing, the malaise, the sheer *pathology* of the fantasmatic relations which secure the social bond, sometimes shows through. In particular, Lebeau emphasizes the costs of this bond both to 'the brothers' and to the 'girls' whose acceptance into the fraternal clan is always already barred. The final film analysis of *River's Edge* takes us to an edge from which we are invited to look down into an abyss beyond psychosis, beyond affect: an abyss that arguably yawns beneath the fantasmatic 'as if' of a loving and omnipotent primal father. Lebeau's analysis of this film questions the nature of the infamous 'look' that the youths cast at the body of the girl in the woods murdered by one of their group. Eschewing dominant readings of that look as 'postmodern' or 'affectless', and eschewing, also, a dominant critical tendency to disparage the 1980s youth generation in relation to the active, political lives of the 1960s kids (today's critics), Lebeau argues that Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*, which arguably initiated such leftwing criticism, was, like Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, subscribing to the very fantasy of Narcissus that it avowedly critiqued. Following Abraham and Torok, Lebeau reads *River's Edge* to show the costs of this investment, both for 'the brothers' and for their 'sisters'. In what becomes a summing up of the book's argument as well as its further elaboration, *River's Edge*'s address is read as a possession by the subject of 'somebody else's desire to protect their own idealized status' (p. 136). Lebeau reads *River's Edge*'s strangely 'unseeing' look at the body of the murdered girl in relation to a melancholic fantasy of there being 'nothing to lose': a fantasy that underpins an identification with the (always already lost) primal father. Crucially, while the brothers remain caught in this melancholic agony, their guilty knowledge has to be acted out on the body of woman, so that it is she who *is* murdered and she who, due to her exclusion from the fraternal bond, never really existed anyway so need not, or rather cannot, be mourned. Here there are only 'lost angels', although some, as you can see, are more 'lost' than others.

I have already described *Lost Angels* as brilliant. This critical

cross-reading of Adorno's work on mass cinema and Freud's analyses of mass psychology through Joan Copjec's critique of *Screen*-style Lacanian cine-psychoanalysis, and Abraham's and Torok's revisions of Freud, has produced a significant rethinking of spectatorship theory. In particular, the attempt to elaborate a feminist theory of cinema's relation to the production of the social or collective subject is very valuable indeed. But, like the 'primal father' described by *Lost Angels*, this book's brilliance dazzles. Having read, reread and read this book again, its overall argument remains obscure. Although the language of the unconscious has to be learnt, once learnt, it is the primitive, rather than the complex or difficult, nature of its enunciations which problematize easy assimilation. Why then do so many *academic* deployments of psychoanalysis *revel* in an ambiguity that seems to me to be very much at odds with psychoanalysis's *clinical* theory and practice? At some level, this book's refusal to say what it really means smacks more of disavowal than of legitimate complexity of argument.

My second question about this book concerns the weight of theory its film texts are asked to carry. In one sense, this is a question about research methodology, since the grounds for the selection of these particular films are never made explicit. This leaves hanging questions about the representativeness of these films in relation to genre, period and popularity. And if these films *are* arguably representative of a genre and/or period (the 1980s), then how are we to understand the book's thesis in relation to questions concerning history, psychoanalysis and audience? *Lost Angels*'s problematization of dominant cine-psychoanalysis's residual reflectionism, in favour of an approach that foregrounds the fantasmatic nature of identification and cinema's 'fictionalizing' of the social, appears to have stymied such questions. But they hang tantalizingly in the air, leaving the reader wondering about the relation between 'youth' audiences and their pleasures, the 1980s as a period, and the pathological nature of the social tie that emerges through this book's analysis of these films. Yet again, questions of psychoanalysis and *history* hang silently in the air beaten by angel's wings.

review:

Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret. Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 409pp.

GINETTE VINCEDEAU

Dudley Andrew's interest in the French cinema of the classical period already informs many of his articles, as well as his book on André Bazin. *Mists of Regret* clearly represents a culminating point of this ongoing research. That the book was long in the making is evident from the acknowledgements which trace it back to 1978, but it is also obvious from the book's length, density and breadth of references. This is a work of both deep personal reflection and impressive scholarship which, in these days (in the UK at least) of fast turnovers dictated by the research selectivity exercises, confirms that very good books usually take a very long time. I write this from the point of view of someone who disagrees with some of the book's methods and conclusions, but who is in no doubt that *Mists of Regret* immediately takes its place among the very few serious contemporary studies of French cinema.

Although not immediately obvious from the title, this is a book about Poetic Realism, a term commonly used to label the dark, pessimistic but lyrical films of the second half of the 1930s, produced in France and exported successfully worldwide, of which Marcel Carné's *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939), and Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938) are the best known. These films are prominent in, and routinely equated with, the French cinema of that period, and Poetic Realism as a 'sensibility' has been of enormous consequence for the history of French cinema; hence its historical importance. In view of this, it should be noted that, surprisingly, no

single book in either English or French had been devoted to the topic until this one. Andrew rightly does not try to give a single, coherent definition of the term, pointing out from the start that the expression is made of 'two of the vaguest "art terms" critics have applied to the cinema'. Instead, he proposes partial definitions which, when added up, offer a multi-faceted perspective on the phenomenon. Poetic Realism, he says, is not a style or a movement but an '*optique*', by which he means both a perspective, and a set of stylistic and ideological options open to certain filmmakers at a key historical moment.

The bulk of the book is concerned with tracing the genealogy of Poetic Realism, and with connecting it to a wide array of determinants: production facilities, personnel, previous and contemporary artistic endeavours, political climate, and so on. Even though, on the way, Andrew inevitably covers some well-charted grounds (Jean Renoir, the Popular Front cinema, the films of Jean Gabin, *Les Enfants du paradis*), the book is consistently interesting and, in the clichéd but apt phrase, anyone interested in French cinema should read it. Particularly remarkable are the chapters on the connections between Poetic Realism and previous art film or high art cultural movements, such as Impressionism and Surrealism (ch. 2), and the assessment of René Clair and Jean Vigo (ch. 3). Unfashionably enough, Andrew does not balk at celebrating the 'genius' of great directors such as Jean Grémillon, Vigo and Renoir (despite disassociating himself from 'auteurists' on several occasions). He is excellent on 'atmosphere', an elusive but central concept of Poetic Realism (lampooned in Arletty's famous lines in Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* [1938]), and on the connection between Poetic Realism and writers such as Pierre Mac Orlan, a key exponent of the 'poetry of urban marginals'; chapter six is particularly good on the importance of the city – Paris – in Poetic Realism, and its figuration in the sets of star designers such as Lazare Meerson and Alexandre Trauner, and considers the importance of *émigré* artists for the 'look' of the films. Chapters seven and eight document, respectively, the twin poles of the label Poetic Realism – the realist and the poetic – with great complexity. In other words, Andrew excels at placing Poetic Realist films 'in the aura of art', to allude to the title of one of his previous books.

Poetic Realism, as Andrew rightly argues, occupies a 'middle zone' between 'the sophisticated and the popular'. He too wishes, he says, to steer a middle path between the 'genius' or 'masterpiece' approaches on the one hand, and what he calls the 'undifferentiated' or 'crude' sociological approaches on the other. This terminology alone makes it clear that his sympathies lie with 'the sophisticated' end of the spectrum and that, despite frequent references to the double-edged (high art/popular) aspect of Poetic Realism, his book essentially claims Poetic Realism not only *for* 'art' (including 'popular art', from classic naturalist writers such as Zola to populist novelists, to a photographer

like Brassai), but *against* 'the popular' understood in its mass audience/box-office sense. Andrew's dislike of many aspects of French popular entertainment surfaces regularly, and nowhere more forcefully than when 'the theatrical' is concerned. Whereas the historic 'theatrical' in *Les Enfants du paradis* is celebrated, the popular films based on, or inspired by, boulevard comedies, farces and the like are characterized as: '[reaching] out to the paying customer' (p. 39), 'facile and puerile' (p. 54), '[ruling] the image factories' (p. 120), 'vapid stage plays' (p. 199), 'inane entertainment' (p. 200), and so on. While Andrew is absolutely right that Poetic Realism is novelistic in inspiration rather than theatrical, why belittle the latter in order to celebrate the former? Apart from reprising generations of earlier critics' prejudices, Andrew's terminology and sentiment are symptomatic of a problematic concept of the audience, which is neither the theoretical spectator nor the historical audience, but an organic body which 'begs' for certain films and has a belly which fails to digest others. It is of course impossible to recreate the spectators of the 1930s and their responses, but one good starting point may be the fact that the vast majority of them embraced *both* the Poetic Realist films *and* 'mere entertainment', whether this meant the films of Georges Milton or those of Sacha Guitry. Language and performance, these two touchstones of the French cinema of the 1930s (Poetic Realist and otherwise), are important bridges between the two paradigms. They deserve more attention than they get in this book and indeed they would enlarge its sense of the 'culture and sensibility' of France at the time.

The above reservations point to areas of debate and further work which *Mists of Regret* will inevitably provoke. The book is an invaluable intervention in (albeit canonical aspects of) popular culture in 1930s France. It also significantly enlarges the Poetic Realist canon, incorporating the work of Pierre Chenal, a director who has only recently begun to receive the recognition he deserves with, in particular, his *La Rue sans nom* (1933), the first film historically labelled 'poetic realist', and *Crime et châtiment* (1935). More 'marginal' (though successful) films, such as *Amok* (Fédor Ozep, 1933), and *Le Puritain* (Jeff Musso, 1937) are discussed, as is *La Maternelle* (Marie Epstein and Jean Benoît-Lévy, 1934), I would personally have included Anatole Litvak's remarkable *Coeur de Lilas* (1931) and Roger Richebé's *Prisons de femmes* (1938), but then the point of canons is that they can be challenged.

Mists of Regret is beautifully illustrated and the care with which it has been produced, echoing that of its conception, shows in its accuracy. *Mists of Regret* succeeds in documenting, as well as evoking, the seductiveness of Poetic Realism, its appeal to the emotions, 'the fatality of its themes'; in short, its ability to offer, as Andrew puts it, a 'hypnotic experience'.

review:

Edward Gallafent, *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director*. London: Studio Vista, 1994, 256pp.

PAUL MCDONALD

There may be a problem with the title of this book. Gallafent takes nearly all of Eastwood's films, structuring a discussion which gathers films together according to genre or similarities of character (for example 'The later Westerns' or 'The Callahan films'). This form of organization becomes most problematic in the chapter 'Eastwood's travels: the road movies', where it has to be asked if the journey by road is a rather tenuous link for grouping together films as diverse as *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (Michael Cimino, 1974), *Bronco Billy* (Clint Eastwood, 1980) and *Pink Cadillac* (Buddy Van Horn, 1989). Despite Gallafent's grouping of films in these ways, his analysis still treats each single film in isolation. Across each chapter, and the book as a whole, each film is approached as almost entirely disconnected from the other films. The effect of this structure is that any sense of a continuous element which would bring together these films, which for this book would have to be Clint Eastwood as actor and director, begins to disappear.

From this disconnected analysis, it becomes very difficult to judge what happens when Eastwood acts in a film. Following his early career in the spaghetti Westerns, it could be asked what the effect is of Eastwood appearing in war movies such as *Where Eagles Dare* (Brian Hutton, 1968), *Kelly's Heroes* (Brian Hutton, 1970) or *Heartbreak Ridge* (Clint Eastwood, 1986). What is a war movie? What effect does the war movie have on Eastwood's image, or what aspects of that image appear to be significant in the war movie? The

point of seeing stars or actors as a collection of meanings which form an image is that it recognizes that an identity is constructed across a number of roles, and that the performer means something prior to, and independent of, any individual role. The disconnectedness of Gallafent's analysis does not assemble the means for understanding the Eastwood image, and provides only a sense that in all these films, which appear otherwise to be randomly collected, someone called Clint Eastwood appeared.

Gallafent's point of connection with Eastwood as a performer is limited to a reading of his narrative roles alone, which cannot open up a discussion of actors or acting, for it does not recognize those roles as performed roles. Brief and infrequent mentions are made by Gallafent to Eastwood's use of the voice and body, but these should be the very starting point for a discussion of the actor. Without such work, the book cannot provide any sense that Eastwood's performance of the Harry Callahan character in *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), *Magnum Force* (Ted Post, 1973), *The Enforcer* (James Fargo, 1976), *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983) or *The Dead Pool* (Buddy Van Horn, 1988) would be any different had he been played by Jim Carrey.

Analysis of acting would also have developed the questions of gender and sexuality which Gallafent approaches in his discussion of Eastwood's roles. *Tightrope* (Richard Tuggle, 1984), for example, very obviously brings to the fore situations in which masculinity is constituted through sexuality. While a description of the character Wes Block's trajectory in the narrative would tell us of the situations and characters which confront the male protagonist, this can only tell us a little of how Eastwood features as an actor. In the broadest of terms, studying acting may indicate the responses of a character to a situation, and how the actor performs that response. A study of acting would have drawn attention to how part of Eastwood's image as a performer comes through how he uses the voice and body to perform a kind of 'attitude' across his roles. In *Tightrope*, this could be seen to inform how Block's masculinity is acted, and how this differentiates him from Beryl Thibodeaux (Genevieve Bujold), Inspector Molonari (Dan Hedaya) and others.

At various points throughout the book, Gallafent makes reference to Vietnam as an important experience in US history, which questioned the authority and legitimacy of masculine and national identities. Gallafent does not assume a simple reflectionist relationship between actual historical events and film narratives, but only suggests such events coexist with the dystopian visions of the Callahan movies and the national conflicts of *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976). While locating the films historically does benefit a sense of what the film may have meant in the period of its production, the elaboration of a historical background needs more development. For Gallafent, Vietnam, and Vietnam only, features as the historical

referent for assessing Eastwood as having any wider social meaning. In the case of the Callahan films, for example, could these not be also located in conjunction with the legal changes and journalistic commentaries on law and order in the 1970s and 1980s, discourses which are more directly related to the narrative thematics of the films?

Nowhere in the book does Gallafent make claims for Eastwood's directing as constructing an authorial vision in single films or across a series of films. While this avoids the problematics of authorship, it also neglects what, if anything, is interesting in Eastwood as a director. The chapter 'Sentimental and otherwise' includes discussions of *Play Misty for Me* (1971) and *Breezy* (1973), both directed by Eastwood. In the former case, Eastwood's combined involvement as male lead and director could have provided a useful point for an exploration of reading his role as victimized male in association with his managerial power as director. As the book does not develop an angle on what the reader is supposed to draw from Eastwood's directorial work, it is difficult to assess why *Breezy*, a film which Eastwood directed but did not act in, should appear in the book at all. In his opening remarks, Gallafent acknowledges that Eastwood's control of Malpaso could influence the products of the company, only to immediately state that he will not explore such conditions. Detailed discussion of Eastwood's involvement in the production history of the films he has directed would have offered an account of Eastwood as director while still avoiding claims for authorial autonomy.

It is very clear that in mounting these criticisms of the book I have presumed some of the conceptual orthodoxy of film and cultural studies: the need to see stars as intertextual constructions; the interrelationships between filmic discourse and other coexistent meanings; authorship as collective production. Although the book belongs to the *Movie* series published through Studio Vista, my criticisms are not intended to roll back the years for the purpose of further jibing between the pages of *Screen* and the *Movie* tradition. This book does appear to create problems even on its own terms. The close textual analysis of single isolated films does not offer the insights necessary to understand Eastwood as actor or director. It could be argued that attempts to construct such an identity have problems if they see only similarity and unity where any star's image is configured through heterogeneity and contradiction, or if they presume a crude auteurist concern with imagining a sovereign creative consciousness. But Gallafent has succeeded in discussing nearly all of Eastwood's films, yet with each single analysis, the book continually leaves unanswered the question of who or what Clint Eastwood is. While I do not think this is the intention of the author, it could be claimed that this only reveals the impossibility of constructing an actor or director as an object of knowledge. But such claims would be disingenuous anyway, for as the recent discussion by some reviewers about the unusualness of Eastwood taking a romantic role in *The*

¹ Dennis Bingham, *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (London: UCL Press, 1993).

Bridges of Madison County (1995) would suggest, the Eastwood image is circumscribed by a particular set of meanings. Gallafent has not provided a discussion of Eastwood as either actor or director. To open up Gallafent's detailed reading of narratives in order to examine Eastwood's acting and role in film production, it will be necessary to read this book alongside other recent accounts on the same subject.¹